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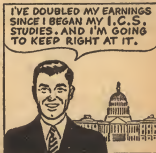
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VOL. XXXVII, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

October, 1950

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By JOHN D. MacDONALD

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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

AFTER taking up topics of such immediate interest and concern as the effect of the H-bomb on human security and the so-called flying saucers in our last two issues, we are now going to step up into the more esoteric sphere of time travel. This seems to us altogether fitting and proper since jaunts up and down the time stream make up one of the foundation pillars of science fiction.

Actually, to travel faster than time one would have to travel faster than the speed of light, whose 186,000-plus miles per second constitutes the absolute speed of our universe. And, as Dr. Einstein and others have pretty well proved via the formula route, attainment of such speed would also imply attainment of a mass larger than the universe itself.

Before attempting further to explain this apparent anomaly, we are going to take a digressive moment to clear up a very general semantic misunderstanding in the matter of "time" itself. For while the speed of light is measured in light-years and parsecs, such terms are virtually meaningless in relation to the seconds, minutes, hours, days and years by which we measure our existence. They are symbols of space-time, which is really far too vast for our emotional comprehension.

And from here on in we are speaking in terms of space-time.

Not As Strange As It Sounds

As generally expressed the idea of any of us, having somehow surpassed the speed of light or better, attaining such incredible mass as to burst right out of the bounds of the Milky Way is simply ludi-

crous. However, when considered more fully, it is not as ridiculous as it sounds.

For, to exceed the absolute speed of our universe we must necessarily go outside of it—in short to tap the macrocosm, that universe of which ours is no more than a molecular part. Only in such a super-universe will the speed of our light be less than absolute. And this we can scarcely hope to tap while we are imprisoned within our own as yet not-so-tight little island galaxy.

To draw a parallel from the microcosm, the universe of the infinitesimally small, it is as if—while studying an electronic motion through some super-electronic microscope—one of our nuclear physicists were to find evidences of some strange device bursting right out of an atomic structure to assume actual existence in our world, however minutely.

The "Overdrive"

If such an occurrence should be spotted, recorded or understood, which is highly doubtful at present, consider the sensation it would cause. For it would be proof of an incredibly advanced intelligent scientific living culture in objects we can as yet only record through tracer media. It would stand nuclear physics on its collective ear. Thus the mere mechanics of physical time travel constitute a problem calculated to strain the mental powers of even the most imaginative. And it is physical—not mental or spiritual time travel—that we are considering here.

Science fiction writers, praise Allah, being a resourceful and ingenious crew, have worked out all sorts of evasions in their

achievement of this near-impossible. First they have developed (are you there, Mr. Leinster?) something called "overdrive"—which purportedly enables space travelers to exceed light-speed in star jaunts.

To work around the universal-mass theory they have come up with something called "subspace" or "hyperspace"—a mathematically possible transdimensional universe into which such travelers can dip at will, emerging where and when they please. A few others have tried to face the universal-mass barrier by a sort of mist-out as the travelers' atomic structure thins in the process of its fabulous galactic growth, to be reassembled with the ultimate slowdown.

This last is one we find particularly hard to take. If man ever invents a method and gadget that will enable him to surpass the speed of light, we have a hunch he will travel within it as comfortably as he travels today in an airliner—or at least as comfortably as in the XR-1. Remember, he and his immediate environment will all be performing the same function and will retain relative densities and probably relative tactual appearances if successful.

Parallel Time-Tracks

At this point in any discussion of time travel some joker usually gets up on his hind legs and says, "Okay—but if time travel is ever going to be possible, why don't we know about it? Why aren't there records of folk from the far future visiting us in the past?"

To this there are several answers. Most favored by our authors at the moment is the parallel time-track theory, which presupposes the existence of an endless number of universes, of Earths, of ourselves, all stemming from moments of individual, world or universal decision. In this proposition—sometimes called the "broom" theory because of the sprouting of straws at its end—a time traveler going back from the present or future would cause at once the birth of a new and divergent Earth, would thus not be in "our" history.

While this is an effective fictional and philosophical device it presents a number of practical flaws—for instance, why should our particular world be one unvisited by such time travelers? Why should only other worlds get them?

A second answer suggests that such
[Turn page]

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time travelers may actually have visited us during the comparatively brief period of man's history and pre-history. Those inclining to this view cite everything from the "white gods" of the Aztecs, which made them such easy prey for Cortez, to various mysterious "lost race" ruins, up to and including Crater Lake and the Siberian meteor blast of forty-five-odd years ago. For all we know they may have something—but we doubt it.

Let's Apply Some Logic

However, in view of the appalling difficulties of physical time travel, we are inclined to regard the problem in a more prosaic light. Let's try to look at this highly ephemeral matter with some degree of logic.

In the first place it seems unlikely that mankind will attain such travel until it has conquered space flight not only to the planets of the Solar System but to the other stars and their planets. By then it is possible that good old Terra may have been utterly abandoned and forgotten—may even have blown itself up. In such case no time traveler would be apt to return here.

Then there is the little matter of accomplishing such a pin-point landing after tapping the macrocosm. Remember, our galaxy has hundreds of thousands if not millions of stars, among which our sun is a comparatively trivial entity. To ask time travelers to find it would be like asking a nuclear physicist to locate an electron within an electron.

Even returning to the correct universe once the macrocosm has been entered would be asking close to the impossible. For just as atomic life in our microcosm is incredibly brief—and each atom may well be a galaxy in itself—so the laws of the super-universe will almost certainly include a vastness of time, a great slowdown, against which even our parsec (roughly 3.26 light years or 19.2 trillion miles) would be so brief as to be practically non-existent.

Unending Rotation

And then there is the matter of the unending rotation of Earth, the movement of our Solar System within the galaxy, the movement of the galaxy itself in relation to other galaxies. Correct calculation of so many factors implies a type of super space-time astrogation which seems well beyond

brains of today, both human and cybernetic. You'd have to land not only when but where. Time travel into the past is thus an incredibly difficult problem from any points of view save those of higher mathematics and philosophy. And time travel into the future is even tougher. If through some trans-dimensional path it were possible to forestall space-time, there would be the little matter of getting into space ahead of the world and waiting for it to come by and pick us up. This would be like asking a V-2 rocket to come down safely with a weather balloon which had been parked carefully along its path some fifty miles in the air—only about a hundred thousand times as tricky.

Outside of fiction and problematical thought, time travel at present—at least from a practical viewpoint—can be considered a virtual impossibility. And even when it is achieved it looks as if there will be no future in it!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

HOLDING down the lead short-novel spot in the December TWS, will be Leigh Brackett with **THE CITADEL OF LOST AGES**. Without elements of time travel this story takes us into a far-distant future to a world half of darkness, half of light, whose one face is always toward the sun, its other facing the freezing darkness of the outer void.

It is a world dominated by the Numi, a mystical priestly sect who, unaided by the science of the past, have developed tremendous psychic gifts in an effort to maintain their mastery over a less fortunate and degraded humanity. Their crowning achievement is a race memory evocation through hypnotism by which they hope to rediscover the location of a "Citadel" of knowledge which legend has it contains the secrets of man at his atomic peak.

Vehicle for their experiment is a rebel named Fenn of atavistic tendencies and rebellious nature, who remembers himself under treatment as Fenway, a citizen of long lost and forgotten New York City. Unfortunately he also loses his identity and memories of Fenn, the man he is in his own degenerate world.

However, he escapes from the Numi with the aid of the girl, Arika, and is able to set

(Continued on page 142)

"They showed me,"

says Mike
(From Missouri)

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SHADOW ON THE SAND

CHAPTER I

Mission

THEY said to Amro, "And now you will learn a new language." There was no desire in him to ask them where the language was spoken and why he was to learn it. He permitted himself to speculate but one of the first rules learned by agents of the Center is that no activity is more purposeless than asking questions. All information that you must know is given to you. The proper outlet for zeal is in performance of the assigned duties. And Amro had

An Isolated Vacation Spot Becomes the Focal

been a Center agent for five Stradian years.

He knew that he was a good agent—one of the very best. It gave him a quiet pride to think of it. His body was good—as hard and perfect and tireless as though made of metal and leather. Other agents had been able to withstand seven and eight complete facial operations before the flesh and bone began to rebel.

Amro had been given, during his five years, fourteen separate identities and when the surgeons had last examined him they had reported no signs of tissue weariness. When no more operations could be performed it became necessary to resort to the mask-maker's art and that was never as completely satisfactory.

But there were more than physical requirements. More important than knowing ten silent ways to kill a man with his hands, than being an expert with knife and farris, were the emotional factors. Amro possessed an almost infinite patience, a thorough lack of imagination, straight-line logic and the ability to make a decision in the smallest fraction of a second.

As a case in point there was the affair of Morr, the almost senile member of the appropriations council. Morr was important only because he sat at council next to Strell, the man most thoroughly suspicious of the Center, the man determined to emasculate the Center through forcing a full scale investigation. Strell, being a shrewd man, had himself guarded every moment with his guard detail screened for substitutions several times each day.

The Center had picked Morr up after Amro had spent two months being prepared, fattened, softened, altered. During the two months Amro had learned to imitate to perfection Morr's every movement. As Morr, Amro sat in on eleven council meetings before the chance came. It had to be done in such a way that it would not point to the Center.

Amro did it without awakening

the suspicion of the two guards who watched the murder.

As the eleventh meeting ended Amro stood up at the same moment as Strell and blundered clumsily into him. To the watchers, Strell appeared to trip and fall toward the table. His bulk screened the quick movement of Amro's arm as he grasped the front of Strell's tunic and, with savage force, pulled and guided the fall so that the bridge of Strell's nose hit the sharp table edge.

That evening the drugged Morr was given the final details. He was placed in his own chambers to awaken the next morning with a complete "memory" of all that had happened. . . .

So now they said, "You will learn a new language."

HE was taken to one of the small windowless rooms where the equipment awaited him. There were a couch, a food terminal, sanitation facilities, an exercise rack. He shut the door behind him. When he was fluent in the language he would open the door. It was that simple.

He selected a spindle at random and threaded it into the instructor. Amro was pleased to hear that, unlike the pipings of the kalla or the metallic clatterings of the Shen, this tongue would not require the use of one of the converters plus ear filters.

The spindles showed no signs of wear. He could not recall ever having heard the language spoken. He shrugged, attached the basic spindle sequence, took two of the learning acceleration tablets, stretched out on the couch and pressed the wall switch.

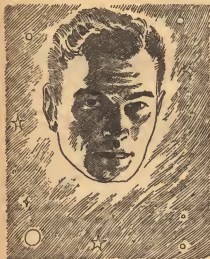
By the tenth day he was sufficiently fluent to request written texts. He was told that none had been prepared but that he would be given tests prepared by the people in question.

They arrived and they were most curious. He sat on the couch and handled them. In the first place they were printed on a white fragile substance which was new to him. And after many hours of intense effort, aided by captions

Point in a Struggle that Spans Two Universes!

under many pictures in the texts, he managed to identify specific words he had learned—discovering in the process that the writing was from left to right in a horizontal pattern, continuous as the white sheets were turned from right to left.

In four more days he was reading rapidly, absorbing facts on the mores, folkways, artifacts, ethics and social structure of a large and almost completely alien culture. Almost was the



AMRO

word to use because the aliens as shown in the pictures could just as well have been Stradians. Of course, because the other items in the pictures furnished no points of reference, they could be as tall as his little finger or three times his height, but he had the belief that they were like himself.

He was able to prove this when he found in one of the texts a measurement which he believed to be a universal constant, a table of displacements of metals. He had proven to his own satisfaction that the "gold" of which they spoke was identical to Stradian eronal. With a common starting point he was able to convert their units of linear

measurement into Stradian tables and prove that they were indeed identical in height to the average Stradian.

This information caused a small germ of excitement to grow in him. Stradian statistical biologists had proved to everyone's satisfaction that the probability of identical races springing up on two planets was almost zero—identical, that is, in physical form.

The statistical psychologists had proved that any dominant high-order intelligent species, no matter what the physical form involved, will share with all other dominant species the common factors of power-hunger, ruthlessness, egocentricity and thalamic reasoning. The bitter warfare antedating the colonization of the home planets of the Kalla and the Shen were cases in point.

Thus he read with the idea of comparing similarities and dissimilarities between the men of Strada and the men of this place called Earth.

And he found that the Earthmen were weak. Weak physically in that it was a rare Earthman who could lift more than his own weight. Weak emotionally in that there were societies and organizations dedicated to the aim of stamping out "cruelty" to lesser organisms. Amro struggled with the word "cruelty" for a long time and in the end he was not completely satisfied with his own interpretation.

Their society had social weaknesses in that conflicts of ideology were permitted to be aired and voted upon by everyone, thus dragging out over many years a conflict that could have been decided in the very beginning by a few discreet assassinations. Their whole society gave him a feeling of disorderliness—of vagueness. It seemed full of cross-currents, hints, unwritten suggestions. There were many theologies but their amorphous connotations were beyond him.

In the back of one text he found maps of their world. The ratio of ocean to land was not unlike Strada—in fact he seemed to be able to detect similarities in the continental outlines. Like Strada

Earth had polar caps and a tropical belt around the widest circumference. This appeared to refute the statistical geographers who had long since adopted as a basic concept the rule of planetary dissimilarity.

Technologically they were backward even though their dominant cultures were technistic. This did not surprise him. On the planet itself their warring groups were separated on a "geographical" and a "linguistic" basis rather than on a social basis as on Strada. Such rigid compartmentalization would, of course, mean a serious drag on scientific advancement.

They were in the eight-minus level, apparently. Later, when he found a reference to the manufacture of radioactives, he quickly revised it to six-minus, knowing that these people were on the verge of Newtonian sub-light space travel.

At the end of the seventeenth day he opened the door and left the room. Lofta, who had been his monitor for three years, a man grown heavy and gray in the service of the Center, saw Amro within the hour.

Amro still wore the sagging face of Morr though his body had leaned and hardened. He stood at the prescribed position until Lofta motioned him to be seated.

Amro felt the blunt thrust of Lofta's mind and there was a sudden reaction of anger. Surely by this time Lofta knew better than to violate his mental privacy as though he were dealing with a recruit!

He yielded before the probing, putting up token resistance only, then dropped all defense, accepting the pain in order to slash back, catching Lofta completely off balance. The older man grunted with the shock, recovered himself on the very verge of fainting, smiled grimly. "You grow, Amro," he said.

"I am obedient but I have pride."

Lofta sighed. "We shall not be angry with each other. What have you learned along with the language you were given?"

"Am I to describe the race?"

"Of course not! Surely you found something odd in the entire problem."

"It refutes certain accepted rules of the sciences, particularly of the statistical branches. A similar race and a similar planet should not exist."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Then you overlooked another seeming coincidence merely because it was too evident. Their day and night corresponds to ours and their climate. This indicates a similar rotation of the planet on its axis and a probable similar distance from their sun. If you have made conjectures about this state of affairs you may report them."

Amro frowned. "It has been proven, Lofta, that one hundred and fifty thousand of our years ago the Stradai had a greater civilization than we have now. We found evidence in the legends of the Kalla and the Shen that our remote ancestors had visited them. No one knows what happened."

"The Stradai went back to barbarianism and we have come back up the long road. Now you have given me evidence of this other civilization. I have heard of no report by the exploration cruises. Therefore the planet must be very remote. I would guess that before our previous civilization collapsed Stradai were placed on this very similar planet."

"Granting the existence of an almost infinite number of planets it would be possible to find one, maybe, very like Strada. It could even be possible that some of the Stradai emigrated to that planet called Earth when they saw the signs of collapse here. They too lost their science, possibly from the same unknown cause. We have grown again and we have surpassed them. To think of Earth as a lost colony accounts for the unexplained similarities."

"Excellent, Amro. Excellent."

"I am right?"

"You said that the planet is very remote. We do not have a ship which can reach it."

Amro started in surprise. "The longest possible trip is six billion light years,



"Don't shoot!" cried Martha
as the figure came tumbling
out of the blackness

Lofta. Beyond that point there is no way to avoid returning eventually to the starting point. Even if there were a second universe placed somehow beyond this one, it has been proven impossible to 'break through' the enfolding of space."

"I do not speak of a second universe *beyond* this one, Amro. I merely said that no ship can reach this Earth of which we speak—yet."

"Then why do I waste time with their language. You speak in riddles."

"Now you are angry again. Do I speak in riddles? We have no ship that can reach that planet, yet it is intended that you shall reach it, Amro—you and others of the Center. You may think about this."

"You are dismissed. Faven and Massio have learned the language. Others are learning. You will find them in room A-Two Hundred Thirteen point Nine. Join them there and practise this language. Within a short time we will have the subjects for substitution."

Amro went to the door. "I would like a young one."

"You are in no position to make a request."

Amro shrugged and left.

Faven and Massio were laughing when he walked in. He had once worked with Faven and their dislike was mutual. She was tall for a woman with a deep coldness and a watchfulness about her that never failed to remind him of the furred animals tamed by the Kalla. She wore the face of her last substitution, a face he had not seen before, snub-nosed and gay, with flame hair and a wide mouth. Massio he had never met. The man was younger and slighter than Amro.

Faven had a nasty trick of plunging without warning a rapier of inquiry into the minds of her equals and inferiors, a darting stinging thing, agile as quicksilver. She indulged her hates and her lusts with equal ferocity. Amro had tried and failed to root out of himself the small feeling of fear that she gave him.

She was the only thing under the sun of Strada that he did fear.

SHE introduced them in a mocking way, using the new tongue. Massio and Amro responded in kind.

"Where are we going?" Faven asked. "That seems to be the question. Lofta was self-consciously vague." She stretched luxuriously, again reminding him of one of the furred beasts, lay back on the couch and pouted at them.

"Wherever it is it is important," Amro said. "I am no longer used on unimportant missions nor are you, Faven. And Massio, here, has been honored for the work he did on Caenia with the subsection of the Center there. To put three of us on the same mission implies that it is of the highest importance to the Center."

"Or the highest importance to the League," Faven said lazily.

"We are growing weaker," Massio said, his voice heavy.

"Damn the League," Amro said. He paced restlessly. "When is this pretense of friendship going to stop? When are the agents of the Center and the agents of the League coming out from underground for honest warfare?"

"I like it the way it is," Faven said. "I like stealth and darkness. You know what will happen when it comes out in the open. We know too much. We can nova a sun, explode a planet, blast a sea into steam in a tenth of a second. What good is an individual under those circumstances? No, let us stay quietly nibbling at each other's throats. At that game I can be of some use."

"If we could strike first we could get it over with," Amro insisted. "What if after we have won there are only a handful of planets? They'll be Center planets, won't they? Ultimate victory?"

"And if no planets are left?" Massio asked. "Just a few manned ships in the wilderness of space?"

"Then," Amro said, "those ships can find suitable planets and they will carry the seed of our science."

"You talk rot," Faven said irritably. "The Center and the League are, as far as two trillion peaceful citizens are concerned, big chummy organizations working hand in glove for the better-

ment of all. It was set up as a check and balance system with the League responsible for all administration and government, the Center responsible for all research and scientific advances.

"When it was set up the smart ones didn't realize that the League, holding the purse strings, would try to emasculate the Center and take over little by little the research end, fattening their own pockets, turning themselves into a happy little monopoly of everything."

Massio said bitterly, "So the Center struck back by setting up secret research projects, taking over administration and government on outlying planet groups. I wonder if those peaceful citizens you speak about, Faven, ever wonder about the high mortality rate among the surface staff of the Center and the League."

"Two conflicting basic ideas of social structure cannot exist side by side," Amro said. "Either we become a useless appendage to the League, or we take over the reins the way we should. It's that simple."

"Amro, the disciple of violence," Faven said, yawning. "That idea of yours about striking first is dandy. But how? Their espionage is as good or maybe even better than ours. Four fifths of Center agents are constantly assigned to the problem of seeing that *they* don't strike first. Do you think their forces are distributed any differently?"

"Your reasoning has always been superficial, Amro. In order to strike *first*, there has to be a concentration of power and a place to strike *from*. Their surveillance makes that as impossible for us as ours makes it impractical for them. And neither side will move into the open unless they can be sure of complete surprise. Outnumbering is no good when one determined space cruiser left at large can reverse the entire war."

Massio stood up. He wore a puzzled look. "I wonder—"

"What?" Faven asked.

"Maybe this unheard-of planet could be the base, the place for a concentration of power."

The three of them were silent. Amro

hit his hard thigh with a clenched fist. "It could be exactly that!"

The excitement in them slowly dwindled as the hours went by. They practised the new tongue for a long time and then played a word game. Massio devised in his mind a complicated sentence of ten words and then projected them, one at a time, into Amro's mind.

To receive each word Amro had to relax his guard at the moment he felt the thrust and then close his mind before Faven could catch the word. Faven could either snatch the word by thrusting at Massio's mind during the moment of sending or by entering Amro's mind during the fraction of a second of relaxation.

TO Amro's intense annoyance she made no attempt to wrest the word from Massio. On the third word she slipped by his guard with perfect timing, thrusting so unnecessarily deep that the pain sickened him for a moment. She did the same on the sixth and seventh word and that gave her enough to guess the sense of the sentence. Since she had wrested the words from Amro she took his place for the next round with Massio sending again.

Amro concentrated on Faven, annoyed beyond measure as he counted the transmittal of six words, stopped each time by the rapidity with which she erected a guard against intrusion.

The seventh word slipped by. Amro suddenly jumped up and turned toward the door, his body tense. He anticipated that, for a fraction of a second, Faven would assume receptivity for whoever might be approaching the door.

He thrust back along that channel of receptivity with all his strength, smashing so far back into her mind that he reached the threshold of the instinctive level. He plucked the seven transmitted words out of her fading mind as he turned just in time to see her topple from the couch.

She recovered almost immediately and crouched there, her mouth twisting and working. "You're vile!" she said.

"It's a lesson you've been needing,

Faven. And watch what you say. You won't have immunity back for several minutes. Do you understand?" He thrust along the same channel again, pushing easily by the slowly accumulating resistance, seeing her eyes lose focus, her lips pale. "I could do you serious damage," he said gently.

"I hate you," she gasped.

He grinned, resting easily within her mind, feeling the hate shadows and the pain. The will eluded him, circling like a trapped thing until he clenched it firmly. Still smiling he brought her to her feet and toward him in the jerky uncoordinated walk of the hypnotic resistance level. He forced her to drop to her knees, caress his foot and kiss the bare instep. Then he released her.

To his shocked surprise she did not move but stayed there, looking up at him. He waited for the return whiplash of her mind as her strength returned. Her eyes, however, held no glint of anger. He pushed gently and found her mind completely open and undefended, held open by her will.

He probed until he found the thought, sparkingly clear, "You should have punished me long ago, Amro."

"Why?"

"No one has ever been able to discipline me before. I'll do anything you ask of me."

Ill at ease, he walked over to the food terminal, said aloud, "Do you have any particular preferences, Faven, Massio? I starve."

"Order for me," Faven said.

When he looked around she was seated on the couch, her eyes glowing. Massio acted embarrassed.

They selected the food and they ate.

gust. He sat crosslegged on a dune a hundred feet from the water's edge. He had wanted to get the effect of the afternoon light on that lonesome strip of sand and brush with the deep green water beyond it.

But how was it possible to do anything right when Fran had been gone over three hours with that supposed friend, Quinn French?

He turned and stood up, peeling the spoiled, botched watercolor off the block, staring back up the coastline to where the lighthouse at Port Isabel was a tiny projection against the deepening blue of the late afternoon sky.

His wife, Fran, had claimed that there was shopping to do. Only after Jerry had indicated that he would stay behind had Quinn French remembered that he had some errands of his own. Three hours—more than enough time to drive into Harlingen.

He shook out the brush, picked up the cardboard box of tubes and the plastic pallet and walked slowly back to the house. It had been built long ago by a fisherman. The gray wood had writhed away from the rusted nails. Four rooms and modern inconveniences—but ample for Fran and himself.

When the company doctors had discovered that the infected skin rash had come from the new compound he had been working on, the company had authorized a six months' leave of absence with pay. It could have been the best time of their lives, he thought dourly. Sun and sand and Fran and moonlight across the quiet Gulf water, protected by the outlying reef.

He had never been completely sure of Fran. She was too lovely and too alive to be sure of. Then Quinn French had shown up. "Surprise!" he had shouted.

Fran seemed glad to see him. And two became three. They could both out-swim him. Quinn French was built with enormous shoulders, honey tan slanting down across broad chest into flat belly and slim hips, then bulging out again into the convexity of thigh muscles and thick calves. His laugh was a deep boom.

Jerry Raymond was forced to admit

CHAPTER II

Doorway

JERRY RAYMOND, stripped down to swimming trunks, stared at the watercolor block and grunted with dis-

that when he saw Fran and Quinn walking along the beach they made a spectacular couple. He wondered if Fran felt the same way. And Quinn, of course, would never have to work a day in his life. When they swam out, so far that he could barely see their heads, he knew that they swam too close together. He thought of Quinn touching her and hate made him feel faint.

Ever since the skin rash—and now it was almost gone—Fran had acted a bit odd. He had sensed the restraint in her, as though he had become something distasteful to her.

Fran and Quinn were too much together. And so Jerry had eagerly agreed when Quinn had tentatively suggested asking another guest down, a girl. She would arrive from New York within the week. Jerry had seen the glint of anger in Fran's eyes when Quinn had suggested the fourth member of the party.

He stood and looked down the road, hoping to see the sun glint on the chrome of Quinn's convertible. Why were they staying away so long?

Before marriage he had never minded being alone. But now whenever Fran was away from him he felt incomplete. They had said that after a year or so of marriage some of the spice was gone. But here it was, nearly three years. And still the thought of her mouth, sun-sheen on her misty black hair, round length of thigh, insolence of breast, made him feel faint and even ill when he dwelt on them too long. Ill with the need for her. Ill because somehow she never quite ceased to be a stranger.

Where would they be? Side by side in the car? Or had they stopped? Had they driven down one of the sandy tracks to a secret part of the long coast? Could it be that, even as he thought of it, the two of them were . . . He made a small anguished sound and struck the outside wall of the house with his fist, then studied the reddened knuckles.

The yellow of the sun was taking on a reddish hue as it set behind the house. Sandpipers ran fast-legged in the gentle wash of the small waves. A gull chuckled harshly, balancing, pivoting to sweep

down toward the troughs.

He went down to the sea and swam out fifty yards slowly, floating for a time on his back. Then he swam in, harder and faster, disappointment shrill in him as he saw that the convertible was not yet parked beside his five-year-old sedan. He stood naked under the outside shower, towed himself, dressed carefully in gray slacks and a white nylon sports shirt. He combed his dark hair carefully and studied his thin nervous face in the mirror as though it were the face of a stranger.

He would get in the car and look for them.

He stepped out of the house. The sun made the shadow of the house long. It stretched almost to the water's edge. There was an odd oblong projection from one edge of the shadow. It puzzled him. He went out and looked back at the house. There was nothing that would cause the irregularity.

He turned and looked at the shadow and the hair prickled on the back of his neck as he realized what was wrong with it. Instead of stretching itself flatly along the ground the way a proper shadow should, this one stood upright.

He shut his eyes hard and opened them again. Some trick of the light, some vagary of the setting sun.

Also, the color of the shadow wasn't quite *right*. As an amateur artist, Jerry Raymond had studied color. Shadows are not black. They are deep browns and purples and blues and greens. But try as he might he could see no color in this upright oblong shadow. It stood roughly eight feet tall and half that width. The edges were geometrically clear, with no fuzziness whatever.

He smiled without humor. It was like some damnable *doorway*.

QUINN FRENCH'S big hands made the steering wheel look frail. The car skittered on the edge of control on the curves. He was conscious of the woman beside him and when he had a chance he glanced over at her, taking in in that fraction of a second the new heavy-lidded look of her eyes, the com-

plete relaxation of the way she sat, her hands loosely linked in her lap, her body slumped so that her head rested against the back of the seat.

"Too fast?" he asked.

"No, Quinn. We stayed away too long. Much too long."

"Sorry?"

"Not really."

"Letting the air out of the spare was a stroke of genius, kitten. Are all women devious?"

"I don't know about all women. I only know about me."

The road curved again and flattened out. In the distance, in the clear grey dusk, they saw the house, the roof at its familiar crazy angle.

"Okay, kitten," he said. "We make merry and laugh like everything."

He bleated a fast rhythm on the horn. Shave and a haircut. He slewed into the parking space and cut the motor. She gave him one quick warm smile before getting out.

"Jerry!" they called.

He blatted the horn again. "Jerry! Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

"Jerry, darling!" she called.

He had left the house open. They walked a mile down the beach. No Jerry. They walked a half mile in the other direction and then it was too late to go farther. She had found the crumpled watercolor and had examined it critically.

"Not very good, eh?" he said.

"Never very good, dearest. Never. There's something cramped and little about his soul. It comes out when he tries to do this sort of thing."

It was full night. Still no Jerry. The night was cool and the driftwood burned in the hearth. He did not come back. She cooked quickly and with competence, and they ate. He helped her clean up. When by accident their shoulders touched in the small kitchen she leaned heavily against him for a moment, turning away as he reached for her.

She had him light the other lamps, even put a Coleman lantern outside where its hard brilliance made deep shadows across the sand.

"He didn't drown," she said, "unless he went in wearing his new slacks and shirt. And Jerry is a man who would drown neatly if at all."

"It's a lonesome country back of here. Maybe he got lost."

"That doesn't sound right either. I don't understand it. If Jerry is anything he's predictable. Everything according to plan and according to schedule. Ugh!"

"Poor darling," he said softly.

She sat on the cot under the windows. He stood by the fire, his elbow on the mantel, the dead pipe in his hand. She looked at him. He slowly and carefully put the pipe on the mantel and looked at her. Slowly her head drooped as though it had become too heavy for her. He saw the swelling of her lips and he took a slow step toward her.

"No!" she said. "Not here. Please!"

But her head remained heavy and she kept looking at him. He took another step toward her.

Outside, the harsh radiance of the lantern was a dot of light on the long coast. The sea, strengthening, moved slowly against the sand. A log collapsed on the hearth and for a time the embers pulsed red.

* * * * *

Jerry was pulled along the corridor. He tried to set his heels. They slid on the opalescent floor. For the first few seconds there was the clear idea of being pulled along the beach and then that was lost.

"Hey!" he said. "Hey!"

A man pulled by his wrist can attempt to twist free. A man pushed from behind can attempt to turn away from the thrust. But he was being pulled along without being touched.

Jerry Raymond detested physical violence above all else. He treasured his dignity and his rights as a citizen. The wonder of there being this lighted corridor beyond the odd shadow was lost in the anger that he felt.

"Leave me go!" he squealed, reverting to childish spite. "Leave go!"

He tried to sit down. If he had managed it he would probably have

drummed his heels on the floor and sucked his knuckles. But the pressure didn't admit of any sitting. All he could do was set his feet and slide. The man walking ahead of him was naked except for an abbreviated, lemon-yellow kilt, pouched on either side with pockets that swung as though they contained items of considerable weight.

Jerry Raymond decided to catch up with that man and grab his shoulder and swing him around. He trotted forward and found that he could not exceed his predetermined pace.

"Let me out of here," he bawled. "Hey!"

His voice was deadened by the corridor. Anger was slowly overlaid with dread. His teeth chattered and his armpits ran moisture and his legs trembled.

The interminable journey continued. "They're going to kill me!" he screamed. That scream was directed at his personal gods, at the president of the chemical company in Gulf City, at the FBI, at Fran, at the Governor of the State and at his own mother who had been dead for over eleven years.

None of the parties so addressed heard the cry for help.

* * * * *

SHE leaped from deep sleep to full consciousness in one bound. Through the open doorway of the bedroom Fran Raymond saw Quinn French sprawled on the couch, heard the deep rhythm of his breathing. Even in her panic she found it possible to like the look of him.

But Jerry was not here. He had not

returned. When she made certain of that fact she came back in and sat down, weak-kneed.

Quinn sat up and stretched. "He isn't back, eh?"

"No. I'm frightened, Quinn."

"And I'm starved. Come on, cookie. Start rattling pots and pans out there. And don't look. I'm going to take a fast dip."

They sat on opposite sides of the small table for breakfast. He lit two cigarettes when they had finished, handed one of them over to her.

"We've got to report it, Quinn. Maybe we should have reported it last night."

"Honey, how many people have wandered by here since you and Jerry have been living here?"

"Why—no one!"

"Are you beginning to get the idea?"

"What are you trying to say, Quinn?"

He shrugged. "Jerry wandered off. Okay. Nobody knows when, do they? So why worry? You can run in for groceries every few days and work him into the conversation. Martha won't get here for four days. Old Jerry wandered off the night before Martha arrived."

She shivered. "No. We can't do that, Quinn."

"Okay. Fill the area up with cops."

"But if he died or something and they find him they'll know that he was gone longer than that."

"There's risks to everything pleasant, honeybun."

"Quinn, I can't—"

"Sorry, baby. I guessed wrong. I

[Turn page]

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thought you had nerve."

"Well—all right, Quinn. But if there's trouble you'll stand by me?"

"What did you expect?"

* * * * *

The horror of it was that nobody seemed to notice him. It was a table made of cool metal, so curved that his head and feet were lower than his middle. It gave him a vulnerable feeling. He could not forget the inhuman strength of the man who had placed him on the table, shoved his feet into the stirrups, his arms into the hinged tubes that now clamped them firmly from wrist to elbow.

Of course it was some kind of psychology they were using. The childish business of pretending to be too busy to pay any attention to him. After the bite of the needle in the side of his throat most of the discomfort went away. Of course he could not roll his head from side to side. He could not even control his breathing or swallow or make a sound.

He tried to think. It was a big room. He got that impression during those violent seconds when he had been placed on the table. The equipment was strange. He could see a little of it at his left. Hinged arms like the things dentists had, only too big, of course. More psychology. Make him think that they were going to cut him up.

It would all be over as soon as he explained that he had nothing to do with the top secret work at the chemical company. They could check easily.

He could hear them moving around. In a small mirror-like surface of one of the elbow joints almost above him he could see the fattened distorted image of his face—but nothing else.

He realized with shame that he had acted like a child when that—that force had pulled him through the upright into the glowing corridor. Well, who wouldn't? Right on a stretch of deserted beach!

Jerry wished they'd hurry up and start the questions.

Almost as though in answer to his

wish a hand reached across his face and pulled a piece of equipment forward so that it was over his face. It was a bowl-like object lined with round objects like lenses. It was lowered carefully and centered. There was a sharp metallic click from the apparatus and then it was lifted and swung back out of the way.

He grinned inside his mind. "A thing like that isn't going to bother me," he thought.

They were talking to each other, several of them. He puzzled over the sounds. The language was thick with R and L sounds, with the vowels given a guttural coughing emphasis. Not Russian—he'd heard Russian—though it might be a Russian dialect. It sounded the way he thought Arabic must sound without ever having heard any.

They adjusted something on the head of the table, on either side of him, close to his ears. The sudden blue light dazzled him. He blinked, the only voluntary physical movement left to him. In the dim backwoods of his mind a child was playing on the wooden steps of a porch in Youngstown, Ohio.

The child's impressions came to him and he realized with sudden shock that this child was himself. Yet he could not halt the progress of recall and it was almost total recall, bringing back even such details as the bars of the crib, the flaw in the windowpane, the soiled pink rabbit with the ear missing.

They were touching his head. He looked up and saw his image in the polished elbow. No, it was some sort of trick. They couldn't do that! They couldn't cut back that great flap of scalp while he was conscious. Then he felt the tiny teeth and saw the great circle of bone cut free, saw it pulled gently away, baring the moist greyness.

Silently he screamed and screamed.

The ovoid black mass, jellyfish slick, was fastened over the naked brain and the silver wire ran through it, winding slowly on the spindle. The fat black little machine chirped and clucked and clattered and memory went on despite his every effort to turn his mind to other things.

Panic was a thing that ran with frightened pattering feet around and around the walls of his mind. He could neither see nor feel the others who, with quick skill, flayed him quite completely, fitted his body into a rubber-like sack, tight around the throat, filled with warm circulating saline solution.

They did the head last and by that time Jerry Raymond was beyond focusing on his reflection in the mirrored surface above him. All he knew was that suddenly it was impossible for him to close his eyes.

The pump tubes were inserted in nostrils and the mouth was sealed. They removed the rubberized sack and placed him in one of the deep vats that lined the far end of the room. The liquid was dark and settled unknowing to the bottom. The shining wire emerged endlessly from the surface of the dark fluid and the pump tubes pulsed in the cadence of breathing where they entered the fluid.

Down in the unknown wetness the soul of Jerry Raymond screamed while he remembered and remembered and remembered, hearing no longer the busy chirping and clucking of the thing that sucked at his brain.

The technician pressure-hosed the skin, dried it under warm air and walked out with it over his arm. It looked like a Halloween suit that had been made a bit too cleverly.

CHAPTER III

Scream

FRAN and Quinn French were stretched out on the sand in the full heat of the noon sun. Quinn's brown shoulders glistened with sweat and from time to time Fran carefully greased her long slim legs.

The sun softened and melted some of the tension and apprehension that was in her. "Martha arrives this morning," she said.

"You say that the same way you'd say the world comes to an end in the morning."

"Well—doesn't it?"

"Good girl!"

"Quinn, sometimes you sound as though you were trying to be all clipped and British. What sort of a pose is that?"

She saw the annoyance on his face as he propped himself up on one elbow. "Now we start to get critical, do we? A plan to make parting easier?"

"I just wondered why you did it," she pouted. "I'd think you'd want to know about mannerisms that make you sound—well, a little phony."

His eyes were cool as he smiled at her. "We're a couple of phonies, you and I, my love. You picture yourself as a splendid warm passionate woman, a victim of your own warmth. Wise up, honey. You're as selfish as they come."

"You're the type to end this in a dirty way, aren't you, darling."

She sat up. He reached up lazily and slapped her hard. "Keep a polite tongue in your pretty mouth, trollop."

The tears of anger squeezed out of her eyes. "You—you—"

He looked beyond her. His eyes widened. He said, "Get yourself in hand, Fran. Here comes trouble."

She knuckled the tears away with a quick gesture, adjusted a smile and rolled over. Jerry Raymond was coming down the beach toward them.

She jumped up quickly and ran to him, her arms outstretched, genuinely glad to see him. "Jerry! Oh, Jerry, where have you been? I've been half crazy!"

He fended her off. "Watch it, now! I don't want that grease on my shirt."

"We just didn't know," Quinn said, "whether to turn it into police business or just wait for you. I had a hunch you knew what you were doing. Now I'm glad we didn't jump the gun."

"Where did you go?"

Massio smiled at her and glanced at Quinn. The memories of Jerry had been just slightly vague as far as visualizations of form were concerned and very

clear, in so far as color was involved.

He said, "Sometimes you have to be by yourself. When there are things to think over. You know how it is." He reached very cautiously toward their minds, finding the expected defenselessness, desiring not to alarm them. He read the guilt, their anger at each other. Fran's gladness to have him back, Quinn's satisfaction that it was all winding up so neatly.

"Well," Fran said, "if you want to be mysterious it's all right with me. I'm just glad to have you back. Quinn, will you mix the drinks, please. This begins to look like a celebration."

Massio took a deep breath of the alien air, finding it good after so long a time of being inside the Center buildings. These primitives gave him amusement. They were so tangled up in the rights and wrongs of their social customs. Emotional involvement was at such a frenetic peak.

He studied the look of the sea and sky. It could be the sky of Strada.

Fran, standing close beside him, said softly, "Darling, wherever you went it must have done you good. You seem more relaxed—changed."

"Do I? Maybe I'm less nervous, Fran."

"Can you stay this way?"

Once again he probed a cautious bit deeper. She frowned and put the back of her hand to her forehead.

They had observed carefully, he thought. This girl was built very much like Faven. Facial alterations would not have to be extreme. And this time it could be done much more quickly because the technicians had satisfied themselves, using Jerry as a specimen, that there was no basic difference in musculature, cutaneous characteristics, nerve network.

It was just that these Earthmen had realized less of their potential and were able to utilize only a fraction of muscle power and electro-chemical neuron force. And the big one was near enough to the appearance of Amro to make it a simple substitution.

He looked along the deserted shore and felt deep excitement. This planet

had room. And it had a peculiar availability. The League would have a sad and sudden surprise when full utilization of this planet was made.

Quinn brought back the shaker and they sat in the sand and made conversation. Massio grinned inwardly at the hate the other two felt and concealed from each other and from him. The test that the cautious Lofta had insisted on was going well. Lofta had wanted to make absolutely certain that these Earthmen had no other means of identification than the evidence of their eyes and ears.

When he was satisfied that they accepted him as Jerry Raymond without reservation Massio stood up and sent a clear mental signal to the agent technicians who waited to activate the dark doorway between two worlds.

The shadow, erect and black, sprang into being. "What the hell is that?" Quinn gasped.

MASSIO reached over, clamped Quinn by the back of the neck, lifted him and hurled him, javelin fashion, toward the doorway. Quinn landed on his feet, fell to his hands and knees. He was close enough to the shadow so that when he scrambled up he was drawn irrevocably through it, disappearing from their sight.

Fran lay there, her face greenish under the deep tan. "What are you?" she whispered.

He did not want to use hypnotic control of the sort he had seen Amro use on Faven after tricking her, because there was no way to assess the mental damage that might ensue. He picked her up and put her under his arm and walked to the doorway. She fought for a moment and then began to scream tonelessly.

"Don't put me in there, Jerry! Don't!"

"It won't hurt you."

"Jerry, don't! I couldn't help it. He made me do it. Jerry!" The last word was a rising scream, cut off abruptly as she was drawn through the shadow. It clicked off as though a power source had been cut.

Massio, using Jerry's memory, went to the house, changed to Jerry's swimming trunks and went down into the water. It felt good to stretch his muscles. He cupped his hands and surged powerfully ahead, arcing the water up to sparkle in the sunshine.

Far out dark bodies rolled in the sunlight. He altered his course toward them, curious about them, driving down under water for the last hundred feet of approach. They were huge, four or five hundred pounds apiece, and he saw from the breathing holes on the tops of their heads that they were mammals. As they came up to breathe, they made a rolling motion that pleased him.

They sped away from him and he moved in again, swimming parallel to their course. He saw that he could not match their top speed, but after a time they accepted him. He probed at the beast mind, found nothing but sensory satisfaction that comes from a filled belly, the joy of motion.

He was with them when they attacked a small school of sand sharks and found in their minds the message to kill, the savage joy of killing.

When he began to tire he swam back to the shore and ran fleetly at the surf-line in thirty-foot strides.

* * * * *

Though the more public figures of the League managed to delude themselves into thinking that they guided the destinies of the League and made the decisions affecting basic policy, there usually came a time when they were confronted with an ultimatum from the group sometimes known as The Three.

They had no name for their small committee. They were merely three persons who worked in such obscurity that not one of each hundred underground agents of the League knew of their existence. Had there been any point in keeping records those records would show the score of times that a policy decision by this group of three had frustrated the best laid plans of the Center. Their hate for the Center was a real emotion.

Dolpha was the oldest. He was a granite-faced man who had slowly accumulated a reputation as an administrator on the most distant planets. Then he had apparently died. A body had gone into the furnaces but it had not been Dolpha's. During the meetings he displayed a courtly dignity, particularly to Renaen.

She was an old lady, as fragile as a cameo, with a mind like the explosive lance of a farris. Her voice and her hands trembled and only Dolpha knew that during her career as an agent, long since terminated, she had made a secret collection of the photographs of those Center officials whom she had forced to commit involuntary suicide.

That had been her specialty. The youngest member, Kama, was potentially the most powerful of the three—a lank damp-looking man with coarse hair and awkward hands who possessed one of the finest conspiratorial minds in the entire League.

"Suppose you summarize, Kama," Dolpha said.

"During the past four months, ever since the death of Strell, which we suspect but have been unable to prove, was Center work, the Center has been peculiarly inactive. This in itself is cause for grave alarm.

"The easiest way to analyze it is to think of what might cause us to withdraw agents from active operations, pull in our horns, so to speak, and play a waiting game. I can give two guesses. One—the development of a device or weapon superior to anything now existing. Two—the development of a secret base from which to use or launch existing weapons."

"Naturally," Dolpha said, "I do not like the sound of those two suppositions. Let us take the first one. A new weapon. I am sorry but I cannot conceive of any weapon more powerful than those now possessed by both sides. It has been pretty obvious for more years than I care to count that the only thing which keeps us alive, both the Center and the League, is the fact that we share the same geographical areas, thus making

it unfeasible to use major weapons without suicidal implications.

"And that single fact has kept our civilization alive. Were we to separate and withdraw to allotted planets each side could very readily destroy the other. No new weapons are needed for that."

"How about a selective weapon," quavered Renaen, "that could kill League personnel without damage to Center personnel?"

Kama pursed his lips and shook his head. "No. As soon as that started to happen those of us left would release the major weapons which have no selectivity. Their thinking is clearer than that. I can see that we are face to face with the possibility of their having founded a new base.

"I have been very proud and satisfied with our system of the recording of any space-flights which could be assumed to be predominantly Center flights. During the past year not one flight has taken off for unknown areas and all arrivals have been accounted for."

Dolpha sighed. "We have never quite caught up with their science, Kama. Could they make a certain area of one planet impregnable, withdraw their key personnel to that area and then let fly?"

"Not only would we detect any such movement but I doubt that should a planet cease to exist any area would remain unaffected. Here is another point I have just thought of and believe me it does not make me feel any better. They surely know that their best method of concealment of any advantage would be to continue their regular activities. And yet they have given us cause for suspicion. That indicates their degree of confidence. Frankly I am a bit afraid. It is too bad because things had been going very well."

Dolpha said heavily, "It is unthinkable that this great race might eventually be subjected to the dictatorship of the scientific mind. We can safely assume that our civilization fell a hundred and fifty thousand years ago because men of that stamp were the leaders.

"Only in the hands of the League is the future of civilization safe. The faulty assumption was that a scientific group and an administrative group could work together. Should we be defeated each one of their petty little people will have untold power, live in palaces, grind down the populace."

"You're creating a very heavy breeze," said Rensen in her trembling voice, "and not only that, I seem to have heard a rumor that you live very well indeed, Dolpha, in that little retreat of yours."

Dolpha coughed and Kama said quickly, "I suggest that in view of their lack of activity in objective operations we take the risk of it being a trick and detach all League agents from preventative operations and assign them to objective operations. With sufficient manpower we may be able to snatch someone with key knowledge in this affair and drain his mind.

"And just in case we fail I suggest that we contact the A-list of all League personnel and advise them to ready themselves for basic flight procedure. We have statistically determined that even with maximum efficiency, one in ten on the A-list will be spaceborn in time but I feel that this is a necessary move."

"Meeting adjourned," said Dolpha. "Work out the details."

LOFTA, the monitor, was properly subdued and respectful when he entered the presence of the Chief of the Center. It was the second time in his life that he had been so honored. The Chief was a smallish negative-looking man.

"All right," he said. "Sit down and report."

"The three agents have been properly substituted. They are on a deserted stretch of coastline in the company of an Earth female. I thought it best not to arrange substitution for her as yet due to the possibility of their being customs not covered by the captured texts. Though, if you will forgive me the thought, I quite fail to see the necessity for this extreme caution. We could move

there in force and there is nothing that could be brought against us that—"

"You are too eager, Lofta. There will be ample time for that later. Solve one problem at a time. We have made the basic and very important discovery of a twin planetary system corresponding to our own, separated from us only by a symbolic logician's definition of reality. This is not a completely physical and technical phenomenon. It is a philosophical phenomenon.

"In simplest terms the formula can be expressed this way: The twin world exists because any definitive explanation of reality presupposes alternate realities. Thus the doorway was achieved by the creation of unreality. Call it negative matter if you will. A sphere where there is no reality must, through the application of the basic formula, be a bridge between realities. The bridge had been achieved but there is much that we don't know.

"Are we in turn available to another reality on the opposite 'side' of us. And when equipment is transported to Earth can we create once again a negative matter bridge to another reality 'beyond' their world. Also are other planets subject to this same bridging technique?

"All we can safely say is that it is a very sound assumption that our remote ancestors found this bridge and populated Earth or the converse. We have no reason to suppose that they on Earth did not have the great knowledge in their forgotten past. To get back to the point, Lofta, the very meagerness of our knowledge requires careful and cautious procedure.

"Would there be any effect on that world of the sudden elimination of this one? Can our more complicated equipment, once transposed to that world, be made to function? Have we any hope of concealing from the League a methodical emigration to that world?

"There are many things to be decided and in this connection I do not care to have to erect defenses against the people of Earth, no matter how primitive their forms of attack may be. At the moment it is sufficient to know that we

have alarmed and alerted the League.

"In their anxiety they will make poor moves. We shall take advantage of those in the usual way. I anticipate that they will withdraw agents from defensive operations. We are prepared to take advantage of that."

Lofta said, "It's a new world beyond that doorway. It sometimes seems—" He stopped abruptly.

The Chief finished the sentence for him. "—seems as though we should go through the doorway and close it after us and forget our responsibilities here, heh?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"But you did. What is there for us here? A slow building of tension until at last we blow our own heads off. Oh, we prattle about the leadership of science and the venality of the administrators in the League. All it is in essence, Lofta, is two hungry groups after the same meal only large enough for one group.

"We said, five thousand years ago, 'Reach the other planets of the system and there will be enough for all.' So we cut up the planets. Then it was, 'Reach the stars.' The distant island universes, the furthest galaxies, the discovery of an almost infinite number of habitable planets—all that was not enough. Why, Lofta? Have you ever wondered why?"

"You're talking as though—as though there might be no point in fighting for what we believe to be right. That is treason."

"Treason, is it? To wonder why? I'm just very tired, Lofta, and a bit querulous these days. The fault is deep within us. During the periods of expansion it did not lie dormant because then space and time were the enemies to be conquered. It never lies dormant, Lofta. This is the secret of our race. There must be an enemy—always.

"The Kalla and the Shen were unsatisfactory. Their egocentricity was not deep enough. They admitted too quickly that there might be room in the universe for more than one race. We'll never admit that. *There must be an enemy!* And when all other dutiful enemies fail us

through lack of resistance our enemy becomes our brother.

"Go now—I talk too much. Here are your orders. Move slowly. When you are certain of secrecy in that twin world I will order you to set up a technical service there and perform the necessary tests. Then we shall build the labs underground."

Lofta walked slowly to the tube, his face thoughtful. He stepped into the carrier, lay down and pressed the series of buttons for the trip pattern. The curved lid closed quickly and the carrier moved into the tube, gathering speed. The whine of the wind came quietly to his ears.

So lost was he in thought over what the Chief had said that when the carrier nudged gently to rest at the Center Agent Station of which he was monitor he became aware of his surroundings with a start of surprise.

The guards took him into the identity lab and he submitted quietly to the retinagram, body heat analysis, cerebral measurement and reflex index. Each test was graded as a series of magnetized areas on the test plate. At the lab exit the test plate was slipped along with his own permanent master plate into the grader. The yellow light which flashed indicated no slightest degree of deviation.

Lofta went to his own office and sat with his face in his hands for quite a long time.

MARTHA KAYNAN knew that it had been a bit stupid to accept the Raymonds' invitation. She knew that she would have very little in common with them. Quinn French's phone call had come an hour after she had received the wire from Fran Raymond. Hearing Quinn's voice on the phone it was almost possible to forget that he was definitely an unwholesome type.

But the way things had been going lately—maybe the trip would do some good.

She was a small girl with brown hair that sometimes glinted red in the sunlight. Her eyes were a soft and smoky

aqua and her mouth had a childish look. A careless observer might think her a quite low-pressure little girl, possibly a bit dull. But the careless observer missed the lift of the chin, the directness of the eyes, the squared shoulders, the determined walk.

There had been a series of perfectly innocuous young men who would make fine husbands—for someone else. Each idea that this might be love had melted under close scrutiny. At one time she had thought it would be Quinn French. But he turned out to be a bit easy to read. And now she accepted the invitation because the one who had looked the best of the lot had suddenly begun to bore her.

She didn't know what she wanted and the knowledge at twenty-six was beginning to disturb her. She had a small income and to supplement it she modeled, wrote ten-cent-a-line poetry that was a shade too precious and reviewed the cinema for a quarterly which had but recently acknowledged the existence of such a medium.

Lately she had found herself taking stock too often. The inventory was always unsatisfactory. A smallish girl with a rounded and nearly perfect figure—health and fastidiousness and a knack of making light conversation. The world was full of a number of things. Why then for the past three—no, four years had everything been so absolutely and excruciatingly *dull*?

And for a time she had thought that this week on the Texas coast might be just as dull as everything else. Quinn had picked her up at the Harlingen Airport in his convertible. Aside from the fact that his driving had become considerably slower and more sane she could see no difference in him. Maybe just a tiny, tiny touch more maturity. But after all a full year had passed and even the Quinn Frenches of this world have a tendency to grow up.

When she saw Mrs. Raymond she understood a bit more of Quinn's affection for this duo. Fran Raymond was both statuesque and exotic. Her husband was dark and slight and not particularly

good looking. She sensed that it was intended that her role was that of diverter of the suspicion of Jerry Raymond. So be it.

But on this second morning, as she let the sun bake her, she was conscious of being intrigued by some sort of mystery involving the Raymonds and Quinn French. They acted as though they had some enormous *secret*. And, during the first dinner at the rather pathetic little shack they called a house she had sensed that they seemed almost to be *talking* to each other without saying a word. Of course that was absurd. Maybe Quinn had known the pair of them for longer than he had let on.

And once over coffee Quinn had looked at her while she was wondering about their relationship and as he had done so an absolutely *frightful* pain had driven right through her head. It had made her gasp and for some strange reason Quinn had immediately looked quite guilty. Maybe the fool was taking up yogi or hypnotism or something.

Anyway it was damn poor hospitality, no matter how you looked at it. She couldn't help but feel that they were wishing the week was over and that Martha Kaynan would go home.

She rolled up onto one elbow and looked back up toward the house. Quinn had most uncleverly stuck the nose of the car right into a sand dune when he had driven her to the house. He was by the car. The chrome made bright glints in the sun. She shaded her eyes just in time to see Quinn reach over casually, brush the sand away from the front bumper and just as casually lift the entire front of the car and swing it over to one side and let it down.

Martha lay back on the sand quickly. She told herself that she hadn't seen any such a thing. A mirage—or the sun was affecting her mind.

When he had gone she went up quite casually and examined the tire marks. The results made her feel extremely dizzy. It was then that she heard the voices of Fran and Jerry from inside the house. They were talking together and Martha was immediately quite cer-

tain that it was some Oriental tongue.

Quinn was far down the beach. She walked rapidly after him. When she called to him he stopped and turned.

"Quinn," she said firmly. "I demand to know what this is all about."

"About? All about what?"

"I thought I knew you pretty well, Quinn. What have you been doing in the past year?"

"Nothing very unusual."

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "No? Where did you learn to make my head hurt just by staring at me? That's twice you've done it and I don't like it. It feels like a nasty hand grubbing away inside my head. And who are these friends of yours?"

"I heard them talking a foreign language and it wasn't any language I ever heard before. And I saw you pick up the front end of an automobile with one hand. Quinn, I think you've been messing around with one of those nasty thought-control cults and I want to know all about it. *Immediately!*"

Amro studied the girl's face. There was something so violent and possessive about her anger that he wanted to laugh. Those eyes were a most unusual shade. They'd give the substitution crews a lot of trouble duplicating them.

"Baby, you'd better get out of this hot sun," he said. "It can make you imagine all sorts of things."

"The sun doesn't bother me a bit," she said.

He watched her fall, then picked her up in his arms. As he carried her into the house to put her on the couch she stirred and glared up at him.

"You did that to me, Quinn French, and don't try to deny it. There's something queer about the three of you. My great grandmother used to tell me about people who sold their souls to the devil. What have you done to yourself, Quinn?"

"Try to take a nap, Martha. You're tired. You're exhausted."

He saw the heaviness of her lids and watched her fight against it. But the fight was quickly lost. In sleep she looked more than ever like a child.

He reported the incident to Faven and

Massio immediately. Faven shrugged. "Females are always more intuitive. I know Lofta wants us to keep her here. But this makes her dangerous. A little accident, maybe?"

"No," said Amro with a quick force that surprised him.

Faven cooed and touched his cheek. "So he wants a little Earthchild playing thing."

"No, I merely meant that there's no harm in her. She couldn't possibly guess what we're up to or how we got here. There's no doubt in her mind but what I'm Quinn French. And by the way, there's *one* Earthling who bequeathed me a supply of very interesting memories."

FAVEN smiled. "We seem to share some of those, don't we?"

Massio said quietly, "Jerry Raymond had it in his mind to kill his wife and Quinn French. I can detect the half-formed impulse."

"I insist," Faven said, "that we get rid of that creature before she makes genuine trouble."

"You can make that suggestion to Lofta through me," Amro said stiffly. "I'll inform him of your desire when I report tonight."

Massio stretched. "I, for one, like the feeling of being able to be off-guard. It is the first time in ten years that it's been this way. The girl won't bother me. Nothing can bother me so long as I don't have to look at you two and wonder if you're League substitutions."

An hour later Martha came out onto the beach, walking unsteadily. She smiled at Quinn. "Goodness! I must have had a touch of the sun. Anyone else want a swim?"

"I do," Quinn said. They walked down to the edge of the water. Martha fell heavily and lay dazed for a moment. Quinn turned and saw Faven standing by the house, an enigmatic smile on her lips.

"I—I must be sick," Martha said calmly.

"No—you're not. Swim out with me."

"You're angry. Why?"

"Be still and swim."

A hundred yards from shore he turned. In his anger he had outdistanced her by a great deal. When she came up to him her eyes were wide.

"Heavens, Quinn! How on earth do you do that? You make bow waves!"

"You fell because Fran willed you to fall. You're right. It is sort of a trick."

"Why would she do that to—oh! I see. Well, you can tell her for me that I don't want anything to do with you, Quinn."

"Will you please listen to me? Feel that?"

"Of course," she said hotly. "And it's a dirty trick. Just like a hot needle stabbing right through my forehead."

"You don't have any resistance at all—none. But I have a hunch I can teach you through visualization. Think of something strong—a barrier."

"Like a brick wall?"

"Exactly. Now pretend it is right behind your eyes so that you're seeing it with the back of your eyes. Just imagine a small area of it and individualize the bricks. Identify them along with the cement between them. Make as clear a picture as you can and think of it as hard as you can."

He tried again, and felt a fractional resistance, a faint rubberiness before the probe slid through. "I could feel you push against the wall," she said, with wonder. "But you got through."

"Try again—try harder. Every brick—the pores in the bricks."

They floated in the buoyant water and slowly she acquired the necessary barrier. It was stronger each time. And finally he knew that the resistance was such that the thrust necessary to get through it would surge into her brain with such force as to permanently damage her. He explained that to her.

"Make me insane just by—whatever it is that you do? Well—if you think so, please don't try it. Now teach me how to do that to someone else, Quinn."

"You can't possibly learn it."

"You did."

"Say I had special aptitude."

"How do you know I don't?"

"I know you don't. Be glad that I've

at least taught you how to keep Faven from knocking you down at will."

"Faven?"

"A pet name. I mean to say Fran."

"I hope she tries again. Have I got news for her!"

"Remember, you have to anticipate her attempt, otherwise it's no good. She and Jerry and I keep the shields erected at all times. It's considered to be bad taste to try to violate the privacy of someone's mind unless, of course, conditions make it such that that's the only way you can converse."

He slowed to let her catch up with him. "Then that's what you were doing the first night I was here. Say, that's only last night, isn't it? What were you talking about, Quinn?"

"Primitive women."

"Really! Are there some around here?"

"Quite nearby," he said softly.

She walked ahead of him up the slope of the beach. He could not resist the impulse. She stumbled and turned sharply.

"See what I mean?" he said, grinning. "You have to anticipate it, or else walk around thinking of nothing but that wall."

CHAPTER IV

Truce

THROUGHOUT the planets there was restlessness among the Stradai. Yet never before had society achieved such perfect balance. With a two trillion population base the increment for each year was sixteen point six billion or, based on average planet figures, a five-planet increment.

Basic decontamination squads maintained a five-year jump on the colonization, a fifteen-planet lead, with the agricultural groups and housing groups moving in a year behind them. In-

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane : : : and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp



IT'S GREAT! Try it! See what a big difference 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic makes in the good looks of your hair. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp : : : spruce up your hair quickly and effectively. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients.

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
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Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
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dustrial resources were at constant full utilization to provide not only the necessary maintenance of the old but the complete supply of the new.

As the wave of population increase hit each prepared planet that planet became responsible for a fixed percentage of universal need, based on what it could best produce. To achieve this orderly result the above-ground organizations of both the Center and the League were forced to work with careful coordination, depending on the orders emanating from the home planet of Strada which over the long years had long ceased to maintain any form of heavy industry.

The entire planet was the bureaucratic nerve center of the continual expansion, a vast paperwork capital where even the smallest bureaus integrated their data on calculators half as large as the entire space occupied by bureau personnel.

A slight error on the part of Food Resources would result in deficiencies to be made up through the shift of manufacturing resources from other items. A faulty tabulation on the part of Center Research Facilities and a planet being currently occupied would lack the familiar huge white standard building common to all planets.

One area of careful cooperation was the ship facilities for the actual migrations. All planets at full population had to be constantly bled for the new ones being set up. Any delay in picking up the overage meant a strain on the facilities of the overburdened planet and a necessary diversion of cargo space to the planet to bring in the needed items from a planet with an overage.

With the Center responsible for the construction and maintenance of all space carriers of the commercial type and with the League responsible for routing, it was the most closely meshed area of cooperation. The League, however, had slowly taken over the construction, operation and maintenance of the vast patrol fleet.

To counteract this potential weapon the Center had liberally interpreted its

maintenance of commercial carriers responsibility and had slowly acquired a "maintenance fleet" which, though ostensibly unwarlike, matched the force of the patrol fleet.

The Stradai were born, trained to maximum efficiency in the occupation which most needed them at the time of training, were permitted to set up a family unit—monogamous or polygamous, depending on the population balance of their home planet—were given physical and mental care on the basis of periodic examinations—were provided with dwelling space and food stations—were given credits for luxury items in ratio to the performance against the predetermined efficiency index in their occupations.

The working day was five hours long as a rule, varied to fit, when necessary, a longer or shorter rotational period of the planet. Creative art in all fields was encouraged but the majority of the Stradai preferred during their leisure hours to frequent the well-equipped recreation halls for the group games and entertainments devised by the Center, put into operation by the League.

The new planets as they were populated became known to their inhabitants by name—Homeplace, Blue, Pleasant Home. But to the central population records they were known by a number, the prefix being the year of preparation and the suffix being the year either in the past or future when full population would be reached.

At the time of the opening of the door to the twin worlds there were 562 planets, of which 486 had reached full population, 63 were in the process of being populated and equipped and 15 were in various stages of preparation.

No man had visited them all or even half of them. Both the Center and the League were aware that the entire 562, due to patrol fleet and maintenance fleet disposition, could be completely depopulated and/or fragmented in an estimated ten-day period.

Thus the smiling adjusted hard-working Stradai of the unpolitical classes walked about with that small ice-tight

kernel of fear deep in their hearts. The very ground under them was potentially unstable and the heavens could gout a white fire that would consume them within the space of a catching of the breath, an upward glance of the eyes.

ON 5980-91, one of the older planets, an elderly worker with production awards imprinted on the shoulders of his work clothes stood by the factory food station. He addressed ten other workers, the entire factory staff.

"Why aren't we told more? Where did my son go? He's been gone four years. I'll never see him again. The Center took him and he wanted excitement and he was glad to go. Have they turned him into an assassin? Why? Where do the loveliest young women of this planet go? Where are they taken? Are they taken to secret places, to be the pleasure of the big men in the League and the Center?"

"What is this thing we make here? Some think it is a weapon. I think it is a weapon. Who is going to use it? And on whom? Why are we so carefully forced, so early in the game, to swear secret loyalty to either the Center or the League? I no longer have any loyalty to either."

The other men, white-lipped, turned uneasily away. The elderly man stood, waiting. At last, high in the wall, the brass voice of the speaker said, "Marana Seventy-nine C point One, report at once to BuPers. Report at once."

He turned and walked out. The gong sounded the end of the short rest period. The others went back to work without looking directly at each other. In the late afternoon a young worker reported and took the place of the old man.

When they reported the next morning the few personal items that the old man had kept in the work bench drawer under the bank of lights that he had watched for thirty years were gone. No one asked who had taken them. There was no need for that.

The workers in the factory felt a certain pride in being allied with the Center. After discreet and subtle question-

ing they found that the young worker was also one of them. Tension relaxed and within a few weeks the old man was forgotten.

* * * * *

The small unimportant-looking Chief of the Center maneuvered his tiny ship toward the asteroid with the ease of long practise. The asteroid was a minute million-ton chunk of black rock, selected originally because it was firm in its orbit, readily predictable, yet without motion on its own axis.

He brought his speed in relation to the asteroid to nearly zero, guided the ship slowly into the circular mouth of the tunnel, keeping it a foot from the vitrified floor. As it reached the gravitized area the prow nosed down, scraped and the small ship settled, rocking slightly before coming to rest. After he activated the port behind the ship he waited and watched the dial indicating outside air pressure creep up to normal.

Wearily he climbed out of the ship, opened the smaller port at the deep end of the tunnel, pulled it shut behind him. Drugged with exhaustion he made his way to his bedroom, pulled off his clothes, stepped into the bath.

Here in the hollow interior of the asteroid were all of the fruits and awards his position merited, the best the culture could provide. Tart wines from the rocky hills of distant planets. Quiet, peace, luxury, service so perfect as to be barely noticeable. A million hours of music no farther away than the nearest wall selector. The golden girls of Garva or the cat-fragile women of Tsain.

He lay in the deep hot bath and the water swirled around him, washing away some of the ache, the tension.

The League knew of this place and undoubtedly knew of his arrival to the exact moment. And, knowing of it, somewhere a trained hand would rest close to a button or switch. The asteroid would make a very small puff of blue-white flame. But if that were done within one second a few dozen sybaritic retreats of League leaders would disappear in

like fashion. It was a form of truce and he had come to accept it almost as a form of security.

The rush of warm air absorbed the moisture from his body. He went back into the bedroom and found that the soiled clothes had disappeared. Fresh ones were laid out for him. He knew that the servitors were awaiting his orders, that there had been a great alertness among them since the moment of his arrival.

Yet there was restlessness mingled with the weariness and he decided that for a time they should wait.

He pushed a button recessed into the top of a small table and stood back, naked, his arms crossed, watching the wide wall of the bedroom. It took on a misty look, shimmered, and was gone. As always the utter blackness was breathtaking, the stars burning with that fierce brilliance so impossible to describe to one who never left the atmospheric envelope of his home planet.

It took him but a moment to orient himself to this familiar sight. And he found Strada, not harsh like the stars but misted like the other planets, so small that even were the atmosphere gone he would have been unable to pick out the outlines of the continents.

The self-doubt which he had felt of late was new to him. Never before had he doubted his own decisions. Always he had done his work, hoping and planning and dreaming that one day there would appear a chance to break the stalemate, to win the first and last victory over the League. And now the chance had come with this doorway into another world.

Why not use it at once? Devise a clever plan of transporting vast numbers of key Center personnel into the new world. Enlarge the doorway and set up others. Turn the other world into an arsenal. Flood their heavens with ships of the Center. Then, with the first genuinely impregnable fortress that had existed for a dozen generations, issue forth to smash the League. Why not?

He knew he had lied to Lofta. There was no real reason for great slowness. There was every reason to make haste.

Who could know what the League planned?

And yet—he smiled. The three agents, Amro, Massio and Faven, had reported to him in person. Amro had been their spokesman. It was the first time in his career that he had permitted direct contact with the agents. The honor had awed them. And yet through their awe he had sensed their pleasure in this new world, this quiet, primitive world.

The woman agent, Faven, had very cleverly insinuated the idea that Amro had formed a very unnecessary emotional attachment for the Earthwoman who lived among them, not suspecting their origin. And he had seen Amro's anger, in itself a guarantee of the truth.

He looked off through space at Strada and whispered aloud, "There is the nerve center. There is the real battleground. There is the head of the beast. Neither side will quite dare to destroy it for it is the guarantee of power for both the League and the Center.

"If it were gone the chaos of mismanagement would divide the planets into the island empires—warring empires. If either the Center or the League should attempt to move away from Strada, to move the top leaders of either faction, Strada would cease to exist. Our only security is in each other's arms. Hardly an embrace of love."

The decision would have to be made and soon. There were restless lieutenants who would not hesitate at an assassination of their own Chief if they became convinced that he was becoming a burden to the Center. And indecision would start them thinking along that line.

He pushed the button again and the wall slowly took on the look of solidity. He faced the room and said softly, "Awaken me in five hours."

The substance of the bed folded up around him and the temperature of the room quickly sank to the exact degree which he preferred.

THOUGH Kama of the League had no thought for women, he had slowly and pleasantly grown quite aware of

one of the four female guards who gave him the substitution check whenever he left his working area, one of the most carefully guarded of all the League installations on Strada.

For a time he was merely subconsciously aware that one of the guards smiled at him. And later he singled her out. She was not tall, quite rounded, not really pretty in any way. But Kama had a deep mistrust of beauty in any form. This one had a way of looking at him that disturbed him and set his mind working in half-forgotten patterns.

Much to his disgust he found himself thinking of her during the hours when he should have been giving all of his attention to the problem of deduction which the change in Center methods had brought up.

Kama was oddly shy for all of his power as one of the most influential, though anonymous, members of The Three. And so it was another week before he brought himself to request her plate, giving then the somewhat awkward excuse that he was spot-checking defensive operations. He fitted the plate into the desk translator and the tiny magnetized areas were transformed into written information.

Her name was Maen, followed by the usual index number giving the code for the planet of birth, year of induction into the sub-rosa service of the League, intelligence rating. He found to his secret pleasure that she was assigned a small room of her own in the second sublevel under the guard station to which she was attached.

On the next day he called her by name and she flushed with pleasure. And that evening she found a chance to whisper to him her room number and a time.

Two minutes after the time she had mentioned, as Kama entered her room, she held the muzzle of the issue farris over his heart and pulled the trigger. Kama found time, even as his life exploded into nothingness, to wonder professionally how on Strada she had managed to be substituted for the genuine Maen, whose loyalties naturally were beyond question.

She made the routine hopeless attempt to escape and the alerted guard trapped her as was the custom by a judicious use of the wall projectors which froze the main motor nerves. The surgeon on duty studied the exact position of the deadly pellet imbedded deep beside the spinal cord.

She was wheeled behind the shields and the surgeon made the usual hopeless attempt to guide the mechanical hands which performed the operation. The pellet was laid bare but as the attempt was made to deactivate it it exploded with a violence that bulged the heavy plates and stunned the surgeon.

Had he permitted her to regain the power to speak she would have exploded the pellet by saying the key word. Had he attempted a mechanical means of tapping memory the pellet would have been activated.

As was expected, no trace was discovered as to the method by which the substitution had been arranged. Her cover had been protected by a false master plate which covered the minute physiological differences that could not be duplicated. All guards, following the incident, were cross-checked so mercilessly that two of them, driven into complete mindlessness, had to be destroyed.

* * * * *

Martha Kaynan looked out of the window at the grey overcast day and wondered what had happened to her. This short vacation had been intended as a gap in her New York activities which of late had become quite flavorless. She had not anticipated much in the way of interest or pleasure. But there was a strange spell on this coast. The known realities had faded and there was an extreme clarity here.

Some of her self-confidence was gone. Yesterday was the day she had planned to leave. And she had sought them out, particularly Quinn, and had planned to be very firm. But she had found herself saying dubiously, "I had—planned to leave today."

And Quinn had merely said, "I think you will stay."

She had known of course that she would. And she had not questioned him. She had not even wondered how long she would stay.

They were odd, the three of them, and being near them had in some unaccountable way increased her perceptivity. Almost as though a deep racial knowledge, buried for ten thousand years, was being brought up into the light again. Sometimes she could taste their thoughts on the fringe of her mind. Not the real meaning, of course, but the emotions behind the thoughts.

Jerry Raymond seemed impatient, as though he waited for some great happening, mistrusting delay. Fran Raymond hated her. She could feel that. And Quinn seemed to be lost in some personal problem of his own, a weighing of factors. For the three of them it seemed to Martha to be a time of suspension.

And she knew that on two nights she had been drugged. She wondered why they had found it necessary to do that and she had a desperate curiosity as to what they had done while she was in drugged sleep. But oddly she could feel no resentment. It was as though the rules which pertained to these three were not the common day-by-day rules of social behavior governing the rest of mankind.

She turned quickly as Quinn came into the room. She smiled. "A day like this makes me feel like something out of *Jane Eyre*."

"Yes," he said but not before she had gained the clear and unmistakable impression that the name meant nothing to him. There were odd gaps in Quinn's memory. Sometimes, though his speech was colloquial, without shade of accent, she had the curious feeling that English was a language he had learned to speak. And that was silly because she knew that Quinn had been born in Philadelphia.

Something tremendous had happened to Quinn during the year they had been apart. And Martha knew that she had to find out what it was or spend the rest of her life wondering. Whatever had

happened it had made a deep and basic change in him. The Quinn she remembered, though selfish and sensuous and egocentric, had a certain amount of sympathetic imagination, and a touch of warmth.

The new Quinn French had a deep ice-cold ruthlessness about him as though he had been refashioned for use as a weapon.

He stood beside her. "What are the three of you waiting for?" she asked.

He started in surprise. "Waiting?" "Of course you are. Don't try to lie to me, Quinn."

"It's the weather that makes you think crazy things."

"I thought this yesterday. And the sun shone all day."

HE smiled at her but his eyes were aloof. "Why, we're waiting for the end of the world. Hadn't you heard?"

She said soberly, "Maybe you are. Maybe you are."

"A walk will do you good, Martha."

"Where are Fran and Jerry?"

"They've gone into Harlingen."

They walked down the beach. The waves were higher, thudding monotonously against the packed sand. She walked with her head bent, her hands thrust into the pockets of her tan slacks.

"What do you believe in, Quinn?" she asked. "I mean about people. I'm not asking it right. About the rights of people, of the individual?"

"The individual? What sort of an individual? An important one?"

"Why ask that?"

"An important individual is perfectly safe to exercise power in any way he wishes as long as he is able to protect himself."

"And the unimportant individual?"

Quinn shrugged. "The unimportant individual is unimportant and so is any discussion of his rights. He exists as a tool to be used by the important ones. If he has ability the point is to grab him early enough to give him the right mental adjustment to your own ends and then he works for you and against the others."

"And if he gets in your way?" she asked.

He looked surprised. "What can you do except kill him?"

She stopped so suddenly that he went on alone for a few paces, turned and stared back at her. "Do you believe that, Quinn?"

He frowned. "What else is there to believe?"

She stamped her foot on the sand. "I've heard that sort of talk before from some of the adolescent Fascisti but they say it to make an effect. And I've heard it from sarcastic undergraduates. But not from an adult. Look at me, Quinn."

"I'm looking."

"All right. I am unimportant. I am in your way. I'm in a position to block whatever it is that you and Fran and Jerry are planning. Do you kill me?"

"I don't understand."

"Look at me. I have the only life that I'm given to live. I have dreams and hopes—damn it, Quinn, I'm a *person*. Dead, I'm so many chemicals. Do you have the right to put an end to me? Just like that? Just because I'm unimportant?"

His smile was weak. "This is a pretty alien sort of philosophy to me, Martha."

"Alien! Good heavens, it's what you've been taught all your life! What's alien about it?"

He made a long mark in the wet sand with his bare foot. "Okay, Martha. Suppose you have a society based on your ideas. The individual is important. How can that society progress? No conflicts are ever absolved. Warring groups have to fight with words."

"And in your brave society they fight with murder? Oh, brother! You've got a hole in that argument I could steer the Queen Mary through. In your society you might be okay for progress until you get a perfect balance of power between two opposed groups. Violence is your watchword. What happens? The two groups will neatly and carefully wipe each other out and your whole society in the bargain. Is that good?"

He didn't answer.

She said, "You didn't answer my question? If I should get in your way would you kill me?"

"I'd have to, wouldn't I?" he said, apparently amazed at the question.

"I think I'll take this walk alone if you don't mind," she said.

Amro stood and watched her go slowly up the beach. For years the conflict in his mind had been one of ways and means, of increasing his effectiveness with the basic concept of his position in the Center a thing beyond argument or conjecture.

Her words had the effect of attacking the foundation stones of his beliefs and it gave him a disquieting feeling of confusion. He tried to tell himself that this primitive society could not presume to teach an agent of the Center anything. The Center would win. It had to win.

But could she be right? When the conflict broke would it end everything? If it would, the very struggle itself became a struggle to see whether the Center or the League would feel strong enough to take the first step toward oblivion. And for one horrid moment he was shaken by the idea that maybe the entire conflict was pointless.

He ran after her. She stopped and regarded him coldly. "Well?"

"Martha, maybe the answer wasn't complete. I said that I would have to. But that is just a rule. Maybe, when the moment came, I'd be unable to do it."

"This," she said, "is a new high in boy meets girl. Boy declares affection by telling girl that maybe he couldn't kill her if he was supposed to. I'm touched by the depths of your affection, darling. I might test you."

"How?"

"Never mind."

He thrust toward her mind, groping for the test she had in mind, but he met the firm resistance he had not expected.

She smiled. "Maybe you shouldn't have taught me, Quinn. I'm getting better at it. Truce?" Once again there was the startling thought in her mind that the word was foreign to him.

"Yes," he said uneasily. "Truce."

"We won't fight for a time."

"Oh. Of course not."

CHAPTER V

Song

THE Chief awoke from nightmare. His body was slimed with cold sweat. He felt shaken and old. The dream had not been good. They had called him and given him a long knife and sent him into the darkened room to kill. They had said, "It is your only chance for victory. It is the only way you can win."

The figure had stood defenseless in the room and with all his strength he had swung the knife. In the instant before it struck, when it was too late to divert the stroke, the lights had become bright and he had looked into his own face. The bright steel lopped off the head, and the body, instead of falling, walked with odd dignity out the door.

The head on the floor, wearing his own face, had smiled up at him and had spoken. In the dream the words of the severed head had been the answer, the final and perfect answer which he had sought all his life. The words made the entire meaning of creation crystal clear. And the words had filled him with horror.

Now he was awake and he could not remember the words.

He bathed again and dressed. He was suddenly fiercely hungry and he stated his wants, knowing that the food he best loved was always ready, so that no matter what his choice was it would arrive within moments. To drink he requested the tart mead of Garva, made from the honey of the great insects with wingspan of ten feet.

Those who served him were the grotesques, the twisted, broken, almost mindless ones. This was a guard against any substitution in his personal staff.

The wall speaker questioned him

about entertainment. "Send me what you will," he said.

It was one of the girls from Garva. She entered with becoming modesty and shyness and took one of the cushions and placed it on the floor. She sat cross-legged, a stringed instrument on her lap, and when he did not speak to her she began to sing in a low sweet voice.

It was a ballad of her people, about a slave who had fled to the mountains and made himself king, about the delight he had created for himself in the mountain castle until at last a masked woman had come to him. She had pleased him and the king, drunk with her and with the wine had at last torn off her mask to find the white and gleaming skull of death.

"Stop!" he roared, striking the table with his fist.

The instrument was silent and her eyes were wide with fright. He realized that she could not have known of the dream and for a moment he felt shame.

"Sing something else," he asked gently. "Sing a love song—a gay song. And smile as you sing it. Sing it to me."

His belly full he slouched in the chair and watched her with heavy-lidded eyes. The curve of brow and hollow at her temple was very lovely. She was young and youth was far behind him—and he felt near at hand the death that would come. But not tonight.

The black asteroid moved in the perfect and geometric orbit around the sun that shone on the day side of Strada. The girl's voice was husky and bitter-sweet and, because her training had been thorough she would not have changed her place at the moment with any Stradian woman throughout all the light-centuries of the civilization.

"Sing again that ballad of the king," he ordered.

AMRO awakened with an abrupt feeling of alarm. He lay still for a moment, the moonlight slanting through the window and across his body. He peeled away the innermost protective layers of his mind and felt as light as

the touch of insect wings, the distant flow of emotions that would grow increasingly harsh as he neared the focal point.

He padded to the door of the room. Massio lay in undisturbed sleep, not yet aware of the emotional strain in the night air that had awakened Amro. He pushed the screen door open and stepped out onto the cool sand. The breakers were white froth in the moonlight.

The feeling of emotional strain came through more clearly. He turned to the left and felt it fade as he walked, so he turned quickly toward the south, quickening his step as he saw Faven, tall in the moonlight, staring down toward the line of surf.

Sixty feet away, directly in front of Faven, Martha walked toward the surf and even at that distance Amro could see the jerky uncoordinated movements. Her pajamas were a colorless paleness and her shoulders were straight. Even as he watched she reached the surf. A wave smashed at her feet, flooded halfway to her knees. The next wave crashed full against her thighs, driving her back a step.

He reached up through the higher frequencies and found the level on which Faven was directing her commands. He smashed back along that channel, made stronger by anger. Faven put her hands to her throat and turned to face him.

For a moment they fought thus, the Earthgirl forgotten. While Faven fenced with quick, darting impacts he wielded the bludgeon of his mind, smashed down her guard, smashed her to her knees with a small whimpering sound in her throat.

Once he had her helpless it did not take all of his directed will to hold her there. He turned and saw Martha walking unsteadily toward them, her mouth slack, and for a moment he was afraid that Faven had scoured clean the inside of the girl-brain with the abrasive of her will, leaving it childlike.

He turned his thoughts completely to Martha for a fraction of a second, then swept them back to Faven just as she started to scramble to her feet. The blow

dropped her face down, her arms and legs spread. He knew that it had been violent enough so that the aftereffects would not wear off for minutes.

The chunk of coral was half buried in the sand.

He took control of Martha's mind, forced her to pick up the coral. "Now you can kill her," he said.

"No."

"Why not? She tried to kill you."

"No, Quinn. No!"

He exerted a stronger pressure, brought her close to Faven, the coral grasped in both hands, lifted high.

The coral slipped harmlessly to the side. Martha knelt, her hands covering her face, sobs harsh in her throat. Faven lifted herself to hands and knees.

"Why didn't she?" Faven asked, utterly surprised.

"It's something in their minds," he said in his own tongue. "They can't kill. Life is something individual and sacred to them. Also, Faven, you might be glad if she had succeeded. You know the discipline. I am in charge. Why did you try to do this thing?"

"You weren't to know. It was to have been an accident."

Faven got up slowly. The Earthgirl still knelt and wept. As quick as a darting cat, Faven snatched up the chunk of coral and smashed it full at the girl's head. At the last moment Amro tried to divert it. Martha toppled over slowly. Faven stood, her feet braced, a look of defiance on her face. But he had found his way into her mind too many times now for her to defy him.

He played with her at first, letting her think she was holding him off, watching the narrowing of her eyes, the dilation of her nostrils, the hard rise and fall of her breast. Then he struck and moved back out of her mind.

"Amro!" she gasped.

He laughed, the sound wild and high in the night, and struck again. He lunged deep into the softness of her brain, twisting the blow, reaching and ripping. He sensed her wild panic and hammered at her again, this time reaching the threshold of instinct, slipping

past it, ripping apart the very basis of her, the fountainhead of individuality.

The lean proud planes of her face softened and deteriorated and the mouth went slack and the eyes went dull. She stood, a living thing on the animal level, but still erect. Delicately this time, because he wanted the ultimate degradation without complete helplessness, he severed one more strand.

She slumped, apelike, her curled hands, hanging to her knees, then sagged until she stood, her legs bowed, holding herself erect by the pressure of her knuckles against the sand. Her underlip sagged so that the lower teeth showed.

She moved slowly toward him, shuffling her feet. Martha, whom he had thought dead, sighed with the utmost weariness and sat up, her cheek black with the color of moonlit blood.

"Quinn," she said, "I dreamed that—"

Faven, attracted, animal-like, by the sound and movement, edged over, snuffing with curiosity.

Martha screamed with horror. "*Fran!*"

The alarmed animal scuttled back, settled on its haunches and peered at Martha. Martha Kaynan fell over in a dead faint.

MASSIO, three steps behind Amro, said, "I guess she planned to kill the girl. I wasn't certain enough to tell you about it. She wanted you for herself and you were paying too much attention to the Earthgirl. What now?"

"Take her down the beach and call them and explain and put her through the doorway, Massio. Be quick. I don't want Martha to see her again. I—I lost my head. Lofta will be annoyed. She was an effective agent."

Massio calmed the fears of the animal thing by speaking softly and soothingly. He moved close to it, his hand outstretched. Finally it accepted him as a friend. It grasped his finger and Massio walked it down the beach. It chattered and chattered as it bounded along beside him and some of the sounds were almost like words.

He saw Massio pause and seconds later the doorway was a darker patch against the moon shadows. The thing was caught and dragged toward the oblong shadow. The last he heard of it was the distant mewling sound it made at the loss of this fine new friend.

Amro picked the Earthgirl up in his arms and carried her back to the house.

* * * * *

Renaen sat in the usual meeting room and said in a high quaver, "Just two of us now, Dolpha—just two of us."

The old man belched solemnly. "And I guess our questions are answered."

"You mean he was wrong in thinking that the Center had some new thing to use against us?"

"Quite wrong. It was a clever move on their part. They duplicated what they would do if they *had* possessed such a thing and then, when we withdrew agents from defensive operations, which was what they hoped we would do, they struck at one of the most dangerous men the League has. No, they have nothing new."

Something troubled Renaen. She pursed her withered lips. "But, Dolpha, that Center agent was planted, they say, long before the Center pulled in its horns!"

"How can we be sure of that?"

"I guess you're right. But we have to think of what to do now."

"We go back to our usual methods. I'll cancel all of the arrangements Kama made for escape and set up the usual balance of offensive operations."

"Is that wise?"

"Kama was an alarmist. We can operate better without him. Maybe the Center did us a favor. Now we have to discuss a plan, a new plan, and I like the sound of it."

She fingered her unsteady chin. "A good plan?"

"See what you think. By unwritten agreement, the asteroid home of their Chief cannot be harmed. We have studied him for four years, ever since the old Chief was—uh—removed. One of the young ones has come up with a plan.

Their Chief uses a tiny one-man craft when he goes to the asteroid, but he is guarded every moment of the flight by one of their strongest ships. They track him just as carefully as we do.

"A perfect duplicate of his little craft has been made. We have had a substitute ready now for three years, with never a chance to arrange the substitution. The plan is to smuggle the substitute and the duplicate ship onto one of the big freighters. Then it depends on timing.

"The ship which guards him on the return trip from the asteroid is too fast for the duty. So it lies on the Strada side as he comes in. Our freighter will fake takeoff trouble and cut between the little craft and the guard ship. They won't dare open up for fear of harming their own Chief.

"Our best technicians will grapple him and freeze him before he realizes what has gone wrong and then the substitute will be ejected hard enough and soon enough so that he can curve back into the path of observation by the guard ship.

"Then to allay any suspicion the freighter will request the assistance of Center technicians and by that time it will be genuinely out of order. But another of ours, a fast one, will be close enough to lay alongside and offer assistance. Their Chief will be moved into the fast ship fast and by the time the substitution is discovered we'll have him safe."

"Where?"

"Right here, Renaen. Right here, of course."

"I like it!"

"I knew you would."

"We'll kill him?"

"After we find out how much we can get from him."

"We won't get much from him. I can tell you that right now."

"You, Renaen, will have some of the pleasure of trying."

"You are a true friend, Dolpha."

"It is more pleasant with just the two of us, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," he said jovially. And he thought how much better it would be with only one.

A young agent announced his desire to speak to Dolpha and was admitted. He gave the traditional salute. "Reporting, sir, that we did not receive your approval in sufficient time to intercept. That is if you have decided to approve. Their Chief is now too close to attempt the operation safely."

"It is to be put into effect when he makes his next trip out there."

"Very well, sir."

JAKE INGRAM studied the girl who sat on the oak chair beside his cigarette-scarred desk. He wore khakis with sweat darkened patches under the arms and across the broad back. His gunbelt was hung on the back of his chair.

"You said your name is Kaynan?"

"Martha Kaynan, lieutenant."

He looked at her oddly colored level eyes. A bit more here than meets the eye. Nerve and intelligence, probably. Nice and clean looking. Probably cuddle

[Turn page]

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and purr like a little old kitty-cat if the mood was right. And if the guy was right.

He laboriously forced such speculation out of his mind. "That's quite a lump you got there, Miss."

"It doesn't hurt now."

He yawned and pulled the memo pad over closer to his right hand, took the pencil stub out of the desk drawer. Last night had been rough. Two of the wet-backs had got into a cutting scrape in one of the groves east of town.

"What's your address here?"

"I'm a house guest at a place on the beach south of Port Isabel. It was rented by Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Raymond. For six months, I believe."

"Grey beat-up job about three and a half—four miles south?"

"That's right."

"That's the old Coster place. Yeah, I remember hearing it was rented. Just the three of you out there?"

"One other guest, a Mr. Quinn French. I've known him for about two years. I'd never met the Raymonds before."

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"Last night—about midnight I guess it was—Mrs. Raymond and I had a—you could call it a fight, I guess, on the beach. She—hit me with a rock."

One of Jake Ingram's eyebrows crawled up toward his hair line. "Want to swear out a warrant?"

"Oh, no! Nothing like that."

Jake sighed and laid the pencil stub down. "Then what do you want?"

"I want someone to come out there and—look around just to see if there's anything wrong." The words began to come in a great flood. "I was knocked out and when I came to again Quinn was there and Fran Raymond was like—like a monkey. It was horrible."

"And I fainted and when I came to again she was gone and neither Jerry nor Quinn would tell me where she went. She looked and acted insane and I don't know what they've done to her. I'm sure Quinn wouldn't do anything but the three of them have acted so fun-

ny and they can do funny things to your head just by thinking at you. But if you think hard of a brick wall or some solid thing—"

"Hey, lady! Hey, take it easy!" Jake said. "Don't get yourself all worked up. Let us get this straight. You think something might have happened to Mrs. Raymond. Is that right?"

"Yes, lieutenant."

"That's better. Calm and easy does it. Now what would you like for me to do? You got a car here?"

"Mr. French's car."

"Okay, lady. I'll follow you on back out there and we'll see about this thumping people on the head with rocks. About all the rest of that thinking of brick walls stuff—I don't want to be out of line but maybe you need a rest."

She stood up. "I'll be very grateful, lieutenant. And please do one other thing for me. No matter what I say or do, please don't leave me there. I want to get my suitcases and come back into town with you. I'm—afraid."

"Glad to do that, lady. Glad to help." He buckled on the gun belt. "Shall we go and take a look?"

The house looked deserted when Martha drove Quinn's convertible into the parking space beside it. The sedan was there. The lieutenant drove up beside her and they both got out, clunking the car doors shut behind them.

A TALL black-haired good-looking woman came hurrying out of the house toward them, two men coming more slowly behind her. The Kaynan girl gave a little cry and moved back but the taller woman put her arms around the Kaynan girl, half-laughing and half-crying, begging the Kaynan girl to forgive her.

"Is this Mrs. Raymond?" Jake asked.

"Yes, it is," Martha said.

Jake scowled and tucked his thumbs inside the gunbelt. He addressed himself to the two men. "Just what happened out here last night?"

The smaller man looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, officer. My wife hasn't been herself for some time. She's recov-

ering now. But once in a while there's a lapse. I don't blame Martha for getting upset. It was my fault that it happened at all. I just didn't hear Fran get out of bed." He turned to Martha. "I don't know how to tell you how sorry we are, Martha. It won't happen again."

The tall woman clung to Martha, smiling through her tears.

Jake said, uncomfortably, "Well, unless Miss Kaynan wants to charge Mrs. Raymond, I don't see how I come into it at all. You want to get your bags now, Miss Kaynan? I'll wait for you."

Mrs. Raymond broke into fresh tears. "Martha, honey, please don't leave just because this horrible thing happened. I'll never forgive myself, never!"

Jake thought Miss Kaynan looked a little like a sleepwalker as she turned toward him and smiled and said, "Please forget what I said in town about going back with you no matter what I might say. I've just been silly about this. You can see that Mrs. Raymond is perfectly all right."

Jake Ingram set his jaw. "No, lady—I made a promise and I'm sticking to it. Go pack up. I'll wait." He didn't like the way the girl looked.

"Oh, come now, officer!" Quinn French said. "Don't be dull about this."

"I made a promise," Jake said.

He was standing up as he said it. And all of a sudden he was sitting down, peering through his own windshield, the speedometer needle on sixty-five, the Port Isabelle lighthouse not far ahead.

The car swerved dangerously and he brought it under control and parked on the shoulder of the road. He had a bad case of the shakes and his head hurt. Once he had blacked out years before on Mexican tequila. But even then there were disordered impressions in his mind that he couldn't quite sort out. But this had been a clean-cut thing, frightening in its completeness.

He lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. For a moment he was firm in his resolve to turn around and head back there.

No, better think the sun had done it. For if *they* had done it somehow the

most obvious thing in the world would be their ability to do it again. If they could make a man drive his own car they could make him pull his own gun and blow the top of his own head off.

He shrugged. The little lady had told him to go back and leave her there.

The bottle in the glove compartment was hot to the touch and the whisky was so warm as to be nauseous. But he choked down three hefty swallows. It make him feel better—but not good. His pride and his confidence had come always from his strong body and stubborn mind. He could trust in them. He wondered if he would ever feel really good, really confident again.

He badly needed an excuse to pistol-whip somebody.

* * * * *

Quinn and Jerry dragged a table out into the shade of the house and they ate there. Martha had no hunger. She studied Fran across the table from her with the strange idea that there was something subtly wrong. Everything had gone wrong.

She was afraid. And for the first time she began to wonder if she were losing her mind.

The woman across the table could not possibly be the drooling, chattering thing from the moonlight beach. Could not possibly be—yet if she was there was something wrong in the head of Martha Kaynan.

She looked at Fran's hands and at her face, at the pattern of freckles the sun had brought out. She looked for the freckle on the left cheek—the one she had noticed the day before—the one shaped oddly like an hour glass.

Her fork clattered on the edge of the dish. "You're not Fran Raymond!" Martha whispered aloud. "Thank God you're not! Because if you should be that would mean I'm going mad—and I don't want to be mad. Does anyone?"

"Darling!" Quinn said. "You're upset. Horribly upset! Of course that's Fran!"

"Freckles don't change overnight, Quinn," she said gayly. "They never do."

And Fran is dead, isn't she? Who killed her, Quinn? Did you or did Jerry?"

"Please, Martha," Jerry said with a pained expression.

SHE looked around at the three of them. Her eyes were wide. "I just happened to think. Isn't this stupid of me! Just as stupid as can be! If this woman isn't Fran Raymond maybe the other one wasn't. And that means that you're not Jerry and you're not Quinn. I should have guessed that a long time ago. Who are you? Where do you come from?"

They all studied her quite solemnly. She looked into their eyes and saw the eyes of cold cruel strangers.

Amro said, in his own tongue, to Drael, the agent who had replaced Faven, "They did a careless job. She has detected you."

Drael shrugged. "There wasn't much time, you know. And they blamed you for giving them so little time. I wish you were wearing this face. The tissues are raw and there is constant pain."

"What are you saying?" Martha demanded. "Tell me who you are. Tell me!"

Amro glanced at Massio. Massio shrugged. "Tell her if you want to, if you think you can explain it. But remember that if you tell her it will be up to you to see that she doesn't sneak off again."

Amro looked at Martha. "Quinn and Fran are dead. Jerry is still alive, I believe. You are quite right. We are—strangers."

Martha sat huddled in her chair, like a punished child. "Why? Why would a thing like that be done?"

"This is your world, Martha. It isn't ours."

She laughed wildly. "Oh, come now! Tell me about the Martians. Show me your space-ships!"

"You'll have a chance to see them but they won't come from your Mars," Massio said. "They'll come from Strada." He laid his hand on the table palm down. "Strada," he said. He flipped it over. "And Earth. Peculiarly enough we seem to be very close neighbors of

yours. But we have found our way through."

She stood up and her chair fell over. "I'm going and—tell everyone."

Quinn smiled. "From what I have learned of this place, Martha, they would just lock you up. And if anyone should come to investigate we are a chemist and his wife on vacation with a house guest. They can take our fingerprints. They'll match, you know. I think you'd best go inside and lie down."

She walked into the house like a wooden doll. She had wanted to walk around to the cars but her footsteps carried her inside the house, into the bedroom, over to the bed. Amro stood up. "Watch her," he said. "It's time I reported on last night."

The dark oblong formed in the sunlight as he reached it. Without altering his stride he walked through it and was gone.

Drael glanced at Massio. "He is an odd one."

"He wasn't until he came here. Now he is very—odd. He says strange things. We talked last night. He talked treason to me, pausing every few minutes to say that it was just speculation, of course. Just idle talk."

"Tell me what he said."

Massio shrugged. "That it is possible that the conflict between the League and the Center is pointless. That the individual is important. That power might be a myth. Is that enough?"

"More than enough!"

"This Earthgirl fascinates him. She has misled him. He smashed Faven's mind because Faven wanted to hurt the girl. Amro has turned weak. And so I reported him last night after we talked. I don't think he'll be back."

"Will you be in charge here?"

"I think so."

"What will you do about the girl. If they don't want attention attracted to this place she could be a problem."

"Right. She can't disappear and she can't be killed. That's where Faven was in error. But there is a better and an easier way. In her mental condition a much easier way."

Drael smiled. "Clever, Massio! And so obvious that I didn't guess it. Take her to their nearest town and break her mind as you release her."

"It disturbs me," he said, "that this thing could happen to Amro."

"I have heard of similar instances. One of the female agents brought in at the same time I was tried to desert to the League. The man she was covering caught her fancy."

"What did they do to her?"

"They solved it neatly by getting the right sort of information to the man in question and then permitting her to desert. She couldn't make him believe her, of course. Quite a disappointing way to die, I should say."

CHAPTER VI

Jest

AMRO and Lofta stood before the Chief. He appeared to pay little attention to Lofta's report. When Lofta had finished, the Chief said, "Go. Leave the agent here with me."

"But I—" The Chief gave Lofta a long, frosty look. Lofta left hurriedly.

"Sit down, Amro."

The Chief paced back and forth. "You are an intelligent man, Amro. What do you suspect is going to happen to you?"

"I'll be relieved of the present operation and subjected to the mental adjustment test. Then I'll be killed."

"You seem pretty certain of the results of the test, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you wonder why I'm wasting my time with a condemned agent."

"Yes, sir."

The Chief sat down. "This woman—this Faven. Our records indicate that she was effective and reliable."

"I believe she was."

"You spoiled her quite thoroughly, Amro."

"I was angry with her. She was not willing to accept me as the appointed

leader of the three of us."

"And of course she meant harm to the Earthgirl."

"That was the important thing in my mind at the time."

"Thank you for your honesty, Amro."

"There hardly seems to be much point in being dishonest. I—I've known, somehow, that this would happen."

"When did you start to know?"

"After I had many talks with the Earthgirl. Their way of thought is not like ours. At first I was interested because there seemed to be so little point in it. I tried to find out why they are the way they are, thinking that if I could find the reason it would be of help to us in keeping the population quiet later."

"Their histories show that the males are willing to die for principle even on the side of an obviously lost cause. Since this is new to us I wanted to get more information on what makes them that way."

"And you found out?"

Amro looked steadily at the Chief. "I found out that in my own mind I am as important as you—or as unimportant. You will order my life taken but you have no real right to do so. And if I found that I could kill you this moment I wouldn't attempt to. I learned that very recently. But if I were certain by killing you I could gain something for this idea of individual equality you would be drawing your last breath."

"Indeed," the Chief said softly. "I confess that these strange ideas of yours are quite new to me—quite new. And suppose we decide that the individual is important. What then? It seems to be an empty concept."

"If we decided, yes. But if we decided and the League decided to follow that philosophy would not the importance of the individuals on any planet—the little people we have ignored—be such that neither the League nor the Center would bring to bear any weapons which would destroy the planet or any major part of it?"

"Continue."

"And if that fact were recognized by

both sides wouldn't we soon see the foolishness of continuing on the basis of assassination, since the only purpose in that has been to gain such an edge that it would be safe to bring major weapons to bear?"

"And the last step?"

"If violence can no longer be used, then we can only proceed by non-violent means. By discussion, debate, compromise. And that means that you and I, equally important or unimportant people, can walk on the streets of any city.

"I haven't walked on city streets since I was a child. I haven't been entirely unafraid since I was a child, not until I went to the twin world. You might go there, sir. You might find it curiously interesting to walk among the others."

"But," the Chief asked softly, "haven't we gone too far along a particular path to attempt to change now?"

"Yes, sir. But maybe some time it will be different."

"But you won't see it."

"I know that. And I would die to bring that day closer, even knowing that I will never see it."

The Chief made an abrupt change in the conversation. "They have wars there, I believe."

"They do. But in more than half the nation there are men who hold this belief about the rights of the individual and who want all problems settled without the use of force."

"And what will happen to this twin world, Amro?"

"They'll put up a hopeless fight. In the end it will be ours."

"I am giving Lofta orders to have you held. You will speak to no one."

"Yes, sir."

JAKE INGRAM explained who he was. He said, "I heard you people were here on some kind of a special case and I don't have enough to go on to call you in but just something funny I want to talk over."

The two F.B.I. men were young and dark haired, with curiously expressionless faces and the general appearance of bank tellers.

"Sit down," the taller one said.

"I'll take it right from the beginning," Jake said, sitting down and pulling out his notebook. "This girl from New York named Martha Kaynan came in and reported . . ." His voice droned on and on in the small office. ". . . and then, without knowing how I got there, I was in my car and on the outskirts of Port Isabel."

"Sun pretty hot?" the taller one said.

Jake gave him a shamefaced smile. "Thought the same thing myself. But it bothered me. I know the roads in that section pretty well. So after I thought it over for a time I stopped in the office and picked up some good eight-power binoculars.

"I took a farm road and left the car and walked across through the scrub and wormed up as close as I could to see what I could see. I'd say I was about a hundred and fifty yards southwest of the house. With the glasses that made 'em look about fifty feet away and I could see good.

"They ate outside. There was some kind of an argument going on. The Kaynan girl went into the house. The tall one, French, left the table and walked out on the sea side of the house, just like he was going someplace special. He walked along and I held the glasses on him. A big dark oblong sprang up right in front of him.

"And this French, he walked right through it and he was gone. I took a quick look without the glasses to make sure he hadn't walked out of the field of vision but he hadn't. That beach was just as empty as the top of this table. I know what you're thinking but you're wrong. I saw it."

"And then what did you do, Ingram?"

"It didn't make me feel too good but I kept watching. Pretty soon Mr. Raymond went swimming and his wife went in the house with the Kaynan girl. I watched him wade out and dive in. And he didn't come up. He didn't come up at all. I waited and I'd say it was five minutes later he came up about two hundred yards out."

"Was the sun in your eyes?"

"It was behind me. I could see good. He played around out there and then he headed for shore. A man just can't swim as fast as that fella did. The spray flew up ten feet in the air. He came out of that water at a dead run, and I mean he was moving.

"Now you people can take it or leave it. I've given you the dope. It's off my chest. Something very damn funny is going on out there and to tell you the truth I just don't want another damn thing to do with it."

"Why did you come to us?"

"I just don't think those people there are human. If they aren't human, then they come from some other place. Hell or Mars or the Moon. And if they do, that's your problem, boys. Not mine."

"Are you making this report officially?"

"Any way you want me to make it."

The tall one said, "So far there's no violation of any federal statute. We're winding up a case here. I'll request permission to go take a look. Ingram, I've heard weird ones but your yarn—if you weren't a police officer I'd have the little men with the nets out looking for you."

"Wouldn't blame you a bit," Jake said. "If you can take time off right now, I could drive you out there. Take about an hour from here, and then you'd know how to get to where you can watch them."

The taller one reached for his hat and said, "Let's go."

* * * * *

The door had been sealed shut. Amro lay on his back on the cot in the tiny windowless room, trying to amuse himself by opening his mind to the most extreme limits of receptivity. Through the thickness of the walls he could catch random fleeting impressions. Somewhere far above him there was tension. It took him a long time to find out that it was the concentrated emotion of a whole phalanx of clerks working against a report deadline.

A tangle of thoughts and emotions moved slowly closer and he knew that someone was walking down the corri-

dor, passing the sealed door. The thoughts were vaguely of strategy and intrigue, of move and countermove, and he guessed that it was one of the monitors. He tried to find out who and felt the mind snap shut against his probe, exuding an acid aura of indignation and outraged privacy.

A bit later there was an agent passing and Amro sensed the blood-thirst in that mind, the direct and uncomplicated pleasure in anticipating the job for which the organism had been trained.

AND it made him feel the extent of the change in himself. It made him think of Martha Kaynan.

They had taken the Earth clothes from him, had given him back the short kilt but with weapons pockets empty. He thought of Martha and what they might do to her and he paced back and forth by the sealed door, his fingernails biting into his palms, a sound oddly like a growl in his throat.

But even as he paced he knew his own helplessness. Even if he could force the door with his hands the doorway to the twin world was five levels below him. He would have to get by the normal complement of corridor guards, probably three between him and the steep ramp. Two guards on each level at the ramp landings. That would make eleven.

Then probably five more at intervals along the corridor leading to the area where the negative matter, the pattern of unreality, provided the exit to the twin world. There were two agents on duty at that place, controlling the switch. Sixteen guards and two agents. Eighteen armed men. No combination of luck and agility could carry him that far.

He went back to the cot and forced relaxation on his muscles. It was odd, he thought, about the Chief. The strange attitude he had taken. And equally odd that he had not yet been taken away for the test.

Maybe when they came for him. . . . It was hard to break the established pattern of obedience to the Center, of dedication. They would expect cooper-

ation when they came for him. And it was possible that he could provide them with a surprise.

* * * * *

The house was very still. She lay and listened for a long time and all she could hear was the soft sighs of the sea, sometimes the thin crackling of sand blown against the side of the house.

Quinn had not come back. No, it was a mistake to keep thinking of him as Quinn. Quinn French was dead. The three of them had told her he was dead. And Fran was dead.

It made it worse that Quinn hadn't come back, even though she knew that he was one of them—one of the dreadful aliens. How stupid not to have seen it from the beginning! But what chance did a human have of detecting the non-human?

She guessed that a small child would have known almost immediately. Children are quick to feel strangeness. It is the adults, trained in skepticism, who see with blind eyes. Adults search for reasons. Children merely know.

Why be afraid because the creature horribly masquerading as Quinn has gone? Maybe because it was possible to sense the growth of compassion in him.

They looked like humans. They could make themselves look like humans. She knew that they would continue to fool the humans until they had won. And then probably it would be safe for them to resume their own guise. How would they look? Dreadful slimed sea-depths things? Or scaled, and coiled? Alien, anyway—alien and horrible.

She wondered if it were some trick of light that made them able to look like people. No, not the light alone. There had been that moment on the beach when the thing calling itself Quinn had kissed her. They had felt like human lips and his arms like human arms. But too strong, of course. So strong that her mouth was bruised and her ribs ached afterward.

Now? No, not quite yet. She felt his name on her lips. "Quinn!"

They had admitted it. They had told her!

Or was all this another facet of madness. The family had always spoken in careful casual ways about Aunt Harriet. No, Aunt Harriet hadn't been a blood relative. No point in thinking along those lines. But remember Alice at school? What was her name?

Alice Masters, Masterson, Mathews, Mathewson—Mathers! That was it—Alice Mathers. Perfectly all right and then they found her all curled up in the fireplace with the ashes she had rubbed into her hair and all over her face, laughing and talking up the chimney, answering questions they couldn't hear.

NO, this wasn't like that at all. It *couldn't* be! But didn't all the crazy people claim they are perfectly sane. It's only when you recognize the possibility of your being a bit whacked that you aren't.

Now? Try now, Martha—carefully, slowly, three steps to the door. Stand and wait. No moon tonight. Dress? Don't take the time. Breathe softly, slowly. The pounding of the heart will wake them surely. A Congo drum. Slowly—*There!* Now you can see the door, that dim oblong. One, two, three, four steps. Reach out. Touch the screen. Now all you have to do is push it open slowly and . . .

"Go back to your bed!" Fran said.

Martha held both hands tightly against her mouth. She turned without a word and went back to her bed.

* * * * *

The Chief stood once again with his arms crossed and looked across the black void to the misty dot of light that was Strada. After he had listened to that agent, Amro, he had felt that it was time to be alone, to think long careful thoughts. And so he had come at once to the asteroid.

Back on Strada the problem was too close. It surrounded and smothered him. It echoed in the corridors, chattered in the billion upon billion of electronic relays in the calculators and computers. Five hundred and sixty-one planets dependent on Strada. Ceaseless flow of or-

ders. Move the exploration crews to sector fourteen hundred ten.

Eight hundred tons of Compound Seven to Planet 6003-11—Emergency. Two hundred thousand Stradai awaiting passage to 6118-7b. Conduct search for missing freighter in sector thirteen hundred seventy. Send specialists to 6202-7c to determine cause of resistance to atmospheric envelope. Send food at once. Send hate. Send envy. Send death.

Strada—nerve center. Brain and head—record center of plans, inventories, census, secret agents of League and Center. Loyalty records.

And what if the beast was headless? No food, no specialists, no transportation for those who waited. Five hundred and sixty-one orphaned planet children, rapidly growing unkempt, thrust into freedom.

"What then?" he said aloud.

One could guess. Endless and crippling confusion as each planet slowly strove for self-sufficiency, staggering under the continually increasing burden of population. The ancient adjustments—famine, disease and war. Each planet busily scrubbing its own laundry, then at last, home task completed, turning to stare with avidity at a neighbor world.

In the struggle some of them would lose the knack, the skill, for space travel. They might go for generations, never visited. The language slowly changing, even the physical form of the Stradai changing, once limited to the specific planet, to a specific set of environmental influences. Then vast combines and wars and empires rising and falling.

An enormous setback to the unified efficient Stradian civilization. Or, he thought, could it *really* be called a setback. It was rumored that there had once been a golden age before the Stradai had lifted themselves from the surface of their home planet. But the histories had been lost, of course. What had the Stradai believed in then?

Slowly the plan was forming itself in his mind and he knew that it was either wisdom—or the most foul stupidity. And he knew that somehow he would carry it through.

Then he went back to the port and into the tunnel and shut himself in the small craft. The large port behind him opened and the imprisoned air gouted out. The craft moved backward, scraping at first and then lifting free of the tunnel floor as it crossed into the ungravitated area.

He emerged on manual controls, turned slowly and set the control table for the proper oscillation, cutting into his own headquarters frequently with a rough disregard for his own comfort. Acceleration stood with leaden feet on his chest and thumbed back his eyes and plunged a gnarled fist into his belly. And then it eased off.

On the tenth minute of his trip a space-worn freighter blundered up out of the atmosphere of Strada, too common a ship to warrant more than a glance from the guard crew who had already plotted their Chief's course and time of arrival.

On the seventy-third minute of his trip the Chief stopped daydreaming and gasped as the collision screen showed him that some blind fool of a freighter pilot was staggering into an interception course.

As his hand flicked out to make the shift from automatic to manual he felt the motor nerves deaden. His hand touched the edge of the control table, lay there. The utmost power of his will could not move it. He sat forward in the seat, able to change the focus but not the direction of his eyes. Fear was suddenly gone in his savage appreciation of the wryness of the jest.

CHAPTER VII

Bluff

THE woman came to the door of the room and stared at Martha. "Get up."

"What are you going to do to me?"

Martha saw the slight narrowing of the woman's eyes and she immediately

concentrated on making as clear as possible her mental image of the wall. She was barely in time. She felt the thrust press against the wall, fade away.

"He was a fool to teach you that," the woman said.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"You are not going to be harmed, Martha. After breakfast we will all drive into Harlingen. We want you to be seen with us. And then we're coming back here."

"I don't believe you."

"What good will it do for you to believe or disbelieve? Get up. Stop being a child."

Martha slowly got out of bed. The woman stood and watched her.

"Only the sickest ones among us are as weak as you Earthpeople. I could break your back with my hands."

"That must make you very proud and happy."

"I am proud and happy to be what I am."

Martha pulled her dress down over her head, closed the zipper at the waist. She turned and smiled at the woman. "What are you really? When you aren't going around looking like what you aren't? Some horrid thing with eight legs and leathery wings?"

"At least you have imagination of a sort."

"Oh, thank you," Martha said bitterly.

"Use it while you can, my dear," the woman said softly.

The words set a cold knot of fear growing in Martha's heart. "What—do you—mean?"

"Please hurry. You are to prepare food for the three of us."

"Where's Quinn?"

"We told you Quinn's dead."

"You know who I mean. The other one."

"His name is Amro—*was* Amro. For I am quite sure that he is dead by now also. What is the matter? You look ill. Don't tell me that you feel anything but hate for any of us. Haven't you wondered what Amro might really look like?"

"Yes. But I don't care. He isn't like you and—and the other one out there. He's more like us. He's harder and colder and crueller than we are, I know. But he's more like us than you are."

The woman smiled. "Please understand that I am only amusing myself by talking to you. You could no more affect me by your good or bad opinion than you could be similarly affected by a stray kitten on the street. Our race is so far superior to yours in every way that I have the utmost difficulty in trying to consider you a rational creature. Fasten your ridiculous clothing and go to the kitchen."

"Did you ever wonder if it was possible that you might be the *inferior* race? Creatures from a sort of second-rate civilization?"

"Is that the sort of thing you told Amro?"

"It might be."

"Then poor Amro must have been very unstable when he was sent on this operation." The woman reached out quickly and took Martha's wrist. She smiled and slowly increased the pressure until Martha felt the thin grating of the bones. She cried out, despising her own weakness.

"Now be obedient," the woman said.

* * * * *

Though unable to move he was completely conscious as his small craft was drawn into the belly of the freighter. He saw a glistening flash from the corner of his eye and guessed that it was the substitute being sent out in the identical type of craft. Even trapped as he was he was forced to admire the timing and cleverness of the operation.

They had de-accelerated him so recklessly that it had broken the webbing and thrown him against the table. He could feel the runlet of blood on his cheek.

Endless helpless minutes passed and then he was moved, still inside his craft, into another hull. Then he was in darkness. Through the hull of his own tiny ship he heard the rising whine of the ship enclosing him and he knew that it

was fast—very fast.

And, helpless in the darkness, he began to plan once more—this time with even greater care.

SOMEHOW they had got on a first name basis during the long vigil. The taller one was named Henry and his co-worker was Will. They called him Jake when their questions were casual, Ingram when they were of a more serious nature.

Both Jake and Henry held glasses on the house. The position of the sun put a harsh glare on the water which reflected back at them.

"There they are!" Jake said in a husky whisper, forgetting that the sound of the waves would keep them from hearing anything short of a shout.

They had appeared at the north end of the house, walking diagonally over toward the two cars. The taller woman with black hair wore a pale blue bare-midriff dress. Martha Kaynan wore a yellow print dress and sandals. The man wore slacks and a sport shirt.

They were walking slowly and the tall woman appeared to be talking to the man. Jake silently cursed, knowing how ordinary they must look to his two new friends.

"The big man isn't there any more," Jake said. "I got a hunch he isn't inside either."

"Watch this!" Henry said. The smaller woman had lagged behind. Suddenly she turned and began to sprint down the beach.

"She doesn't go so fast," Will said.

"I told you she isn't one of the funny-acting ones."

The other two made no attempt at pursuit. They turned and calmly watched Martha. The girl stumbled and fell headlong. She got up slowly and turned and walked back toward the other two.

"Look how she's walking," Henry said.

"Just find me an answer," Jake said, "to why she runs up the beach like she was scared out of her wits and then walks back."

"Maybe she's a little off upstairs," Henry suggested.

"I talked to her. I don't think so."

"She came back of her own free will," Henry said. "I don't see how we have anything to go on, Ingram."

"I wish he'd pull something fancy so you could see him," Jake mumbled.

It happened as though in answer to Jake's request. The convertible was parked on the other side of the sedan. The two women walked around the back of the sedan. The man took two quick running steps and vaulted the sedan, not making a close thing of it but arcing up and over and down with ample room to spare.

"Mother O'Reilly!" Henry gasped.

"See?" Jake said triumphantly. "I read a book on logic once. A guy tells you a crazy story and then if he proves one part of it you've got to give him odds on the rest of it panning out."

Will cursed softly and monotonously. Henry still wore a dazed look.

"Well, are you going after 'em?" Jake demanded.

"I'll compromise," Henry said. "Let's get back to the cars and tail them."

"We'll have to make it fast. We've got a longer distance to go," Jake said. "We can pick them up at the fork this side of Port Isabel."

* * * * *

He lay where they had thrown him, the rug soft under his cheek. He felt the volition returning to nerve and muscle. At first it was but an intensification of the feeling of weakness, and then a rising strength. He stood up then, shrugging the toga of rank into the proper position on his shoulders, wiping the crust of blood from his cheek, smoothing his grey hair back with his fingers.

The room was small. He saw the two of them sitting there, side by side, facing him. Their expressions were gloating. A puffy old man with traces of waning strength in the set of his jaw. An old woman who trembled constantly.

He knew how he looked to them. A smallish weary nondescript man—whose time had run out. His mind was racing, selecting, discarding, sorting.

To be forced to stand was a disadvantage. He moved back and leaned against the wall, folding his arms in his habitual posture. He made himself smile casually.

"Greetings, Dolpha—and you, Renaen." He gave them a small, ironic bow. "If you had found the opening we provided more quickly I would have had the pleasure of meeting your friend Kama. But we grew tired of waiting for you to take me."

The old man's face purpled. "You, sir, are not supposed to be that well acquainted with the innermost organization of the League."

"Oh but I am. I know many things. I know that there is a wall between us, and so I shall not make a fool of myself by walking into it."

RENAEN pulled at her chin. She said, "You made Dolpha so angry that he missed the point you made. You speak as though it were planned that we should capture you in the way we did. Isn't that rather a poor bluff? You seek to make us uncertain of ourselves and thus gain the advantage. Isn't that correct?"

"The fact that I wasn't killed at once indicates to me that you were uncertain about many things before you put your plan into effect. And we have been so certain of your uncertainty that I was willing to take the risk." He gave his words a quiet confidence. He was rewarded by the look in their eyes.

Dolpha's eyes narrowed. "All right, sir. Suppose, just to amuse the two of us, we accept the premise. That it was your desire to be taken captive. That would indicate that you wish to speak about something."

"I did wish to. Now that I've seen the two of you, I wonder if it is worth while. You showed a certain amount of intelligence in risking having me brought to Strada but that may be just senile shrewdness."

"There are ways that you can pay for insults," Renaen said shrilly.

He laughed. "I hardly think so. You must have X-rayed me. And the pellet

put torture out of date before any of us were born."

"We have ways of making it ineffective," Renaen said.

Again he laughed. "Oh, come now! We are wasting time. And you will be surprised at how little time there is left. You have one fairly competent man here—Rellovo. I want to state a concept and a few formulae to him. Then you can test his reaction. Send for him."

"Can you give us orders?"

"Can you afford to pass up the chance of learning how the Center has finally won?"

The cold confidence and finality of that statement staggered the two of them. He could see that. The wall between them became suddenly opaque. He waited patiently. When it cleared again Rellovo stood behind them.

The Chief stated crisply the reasoning behind the formulae, the formulae themselves and the result. He watched Rellovo's face as he talked, seeing first the doubt, then the high excitement of the scientific mind, then the staring fear as he suddenly realized that it was in the hands of the enemy.

"Well?" Dolpha said.

"It—it sounds convincing," Rellovo stammered. "There would have to be tests made—we know a little about the nature of negative matter—I would have to think about it and—"

"But there's no time for thinking," the Chief said. "We went through that doorway some time ago. And we've been preparing. Major weapons have been taken into that adjoining world. Installations have been constructed. You cannot attack us there. But we can emerge at any time at any place on this planet and smash you."

"Could this be true?" Dolpha yelled at Rellovo.

"On one hand, it would appear that—"

"Don't write me a text! Could it be true? Is it possible?"

"Yes, sir."

SUDDENLY the fear went out of Dolpha's rheumy eyes. He leaned back in his chair and said softly, "Very

clever. For a moment your bluff came close to working. But there is one question you can't answer. If it is true why haven't you struck?"

"Very simple. We are too closely interwoven here. We can't hurt you without hurting some of our own installations and if you were desperate enough you might attempt quite successfully to destroy the whole planet. The Center needs Strada as the administrative headquarters for the entire system. Now that victory is so easy there is no point at all in hunting you down and wiping you out. Too much trouble. Just give up."

"And if we don't?"

"One hour and—let me see. One hour and forty-one minutes from now this structure will have suffered a slight change. Some of it will be dust, heading toward the stratosphere, and the rest of it should be a fairly large molten pool."

"Every other principal League installation on Strada will suffer the same consequences. The entire attack has been coordinated on an automatic basis and it is now controlled by a timing device in my headquarters. The timing device is so adjusted that no one can disengage it but myself." He saw Rellovo bend over to whisper in Dolpha's ear.

He said more loudly, "Naturally the destruction of my headquarters would set the entire affair off a bit prematurely."

Rellovo straightened up, his face white, his mouth working. "We can arrange to strike back," Renaen said. "In fact, it—"

"—it is already arranged, I know," the Chief said, "and has been for a long time. We haven't underestimated you. We both have had a knife at each others' throat for many years. But it now happens that our knife is sharper."

"If we hold you here," Dolpha said, "you die with us."

The Chief shrugged. "Why not? I would say that my work is over. They can call me the man who defeated the League. When I permitted you to capture me I was taking that chance. One hour and thirty-six minutes now."

Once again the wall became opaque. He let out his breath in a long shuddering sigh. So far it had gone well. The minutes went by. Fear grew in him, fear that they had sensed the bluff, had decided to wait until the designated time.

The wall cleared. Dolpha sat alone. The other chair was empty. And there was a tiny smear of blood on the arm of it.

"Now there is only one of us to deal with," Dolpha said. "She had passed her usefulness to the League. I have been in touch with the others. They will abide by my decision. I see no reason why the League, recognizing the Center as the ultimate authority, cannot continue to function on a dependent basis."

"Our organization is already set up to handle troublesome administrative details, thus taking them off your hands. Naturally both the Center and the League can disband all agent organizations. I promise complete capitulation."

The Chief gave him an ironic smile. "You will not disband your agent organizations only to start newer more secret ones?"

"Why, of course not!" said Dolpha.

"And you will not set up any experiment to develop a mode of egress to the twin world?"

Dolpha gave a slight bow. "The League will have enough to do handling routine administrative work. Science is the province of the Center. Now let us arrange your passage back to your own headquarters so that you can deactivate that timing device. The thought of it ticking on and on makes me very nervous."

"You trust me, eh?" the Chief asked.

"Of course—of course. There seems to be one hour and sixteen minutes left. Transportation has been arranged for you. You will arrive safely at your headquarters when there is exactly fifty-nine minutes left. It should not take you over thirty minutes to establish your correct identity and five minutes to reach the device. We shall expect that as soon as you have deactivated it you will communicate with us through official channels advising us of that fact."

"If we do not hear from you and have not heard from you exactly five minutes before the time you stated we shall launch our own attack on all Center installations. And should you attack first, please understand that your attack, even if all League installations are destroyed, will do nothing to diminish the force of our retaliation."

"I understand."

"Then go through the door on your left. It is now unlocked. Follow the guard detail."

The Chief arrived, as Dolpha had said, when there were but fifty-nine minutes left of the entirely imaginary period. As the substitute had been detected and killed minutes after the duplicate craft had landed identification took but ten minutes.

He brushed off any attempt at questioning and went immediately to his headquarters. He had been able to act assured because the timing device was there and had been there for over two years. But it had never been connected.

He proceeded to connect it. It was dizzying to think of the multiplicity of automatic weapons of death and destruction which lay, brooding and silent, waiting for the tiny impulse. With the most infinite care he set it to coincide with the exact minute at which Dolpha had promised, if word didn't come, to unleash the equally potent hell that the League had labored so long to perfect. And then he prayed to the rumored gods of the long-forgotten golden age of the Stradai.

CHAPTER VIII

Explosion

THE convertible went slowly through the outskirts of Harlingen, the government sedan a half block behind it, Jack close behind the government sedan.

They had confided their plan to Jake and he was faintly and uncomfortably skeptical about it. The only advantage it

had was its quality of innocuousness. If there was nothing at all peculiar about the trio, two supposed field men from the Bureau of Internal Revenue asking questions about the whereabouts of Quinn French would not alarm them. But the uneasiness within Jake persisted. The flaw in the idea was to his way of thinking the lack of a second line of defense. He vowed that he would stay close, but not too close.

The convertible turned right near the hotel, paused for the light while the government sedan idled along in its wake. A half block beyond the light it pulled in to the curb where diagonal parking was permitted. The government sedan picked a neighboring empty slot. Jake found a hole five or six cars away and was out as soon as he had cut the motor, not very comforted by the weight of the .38 special.

The Raymonds and the Kaynan girl got out of the convertible. Jake saw that the Kaynan girl looked sick and dizzy. Henry and Will moved in casually and the trio became a quintet, a casual conversation group on the sun-hot sidewalk of the small Texas city.

It was all so casual and so ordinary that Jake slowly relaxed the muscles of his right arm, ready to take his sweaty palm from the revolver grip.

Then Henry turned visibly pale and took two wooden steps backward. At the same moment Martha Kaynan, half crouching as though expecting a blow from behind, scuttled down the sidewalk toward where Jake stood, half concealed by the parked cars.

Jake was indecisive but then he saw the naked terror on the Kaynan girl's face. It was as though for one moment he had been permitted to look down into a hell of fear so vast as to be barely comprehended. And the result was to immediately inflame him with a hate and detestation of those two who stood facing down the two FBI agents.

The woman turned and Jake saw the fury on her face, the narrowed blazing eyes as she stared after Martha. Martha fell and rolled on the sidewalk, scraping her knees and elbows, her head

hitting with a small dismal thud.

Jake felt an arrow of pain sizzling behind the sturdy bone of his forehead and he crouched, pulling the special clear of the holster. He saw Will, falling backward, his face still contorted, rip out his own gun, aim it with a wavering hand.

Mr. Raymond reached inside the sport shirt and his hand reappeared. In it he held a small powder blue tube, as ridiculous as a child's beanshooter. Jake clamped his teeth hard on the pain and took careful aim for a shoulder of Mr. Raymond. Raymond fired first. Jake only knew that he fired by the effect on Will.

There was no sound of explosion, no visible flash. A ragged hole the size of a basketball appeared in the center of Will's chest and, as he slid over backward Jake, for an incredulous fraction of a second could see through Will, could see the pale stone wall beyond him.

He squeezed down on the trigger, knowing as the shot kicked off that he was a tiny bit high for a shoulder shot. But he was unprepared for the result. Jake had been Navy. The nearest thing to it in his experience was a forty millimeter H.E. The top half of Mr. Raymond detonated with a crack-thoom that shook the street.

After it came the drip and tinkle of broken glass, the distant plaintive cries of frightened women, the bellows of alarmed men, the scream and crash of nearby traffic accidents.

The sound of Henry's shot was feeble by comparison, a flat empty snap that sounded like a cap pistol, but the woman staggered and fell with a spreading redness on the hem of her blue skirt.

Just as Jake began to feel that maybe it was ended, just as he began to suck in the deep breath of relief, the writhing woman on the sidewalk began to scream in a strange tongue. And an enormous invisible whiplash flailed the air. It whined without sound, criss-crossing, flicking, stinging. It cracked against Jake's mind and he bounced off the fender of his own car as he fell.

People a half block away dropped to

their knees and hugged their heads and moaned. A car ran up over the sidewalk on the other side of the street and smashed through the plate glass window of a supermarket. Jake lay panting for a moment and started to struggle up. The impact against his mind smashed him flat again and he gagged.

He rolled onto his stomach and, looking under the car, he saw the woman slowly crawling toward the convertible. Beyond her Henry lay helpless, blood on his chin from his chewed lip. Those who had come running to the source of the explosion lay on the sidewalk, moving weakly, trying to stand, then dropping again as the whistling lash of power hit them.

The woman had stopped screaming in her peculiar language. Martha lay huddled and silent.

Jake Ingram was a stubborn man with an exceptional capacity for anger. Five times he tried to center his sights on her and each time the enervating blast thudded the gun back against the asphalt. But the sixth time he was given a fractional part of a second and he pulled the trigger before the mind-whip was due to return. He could drive a nail at thirty paces. She was ten paces away and a woman's head is considerably larger than a nail.

The second massive detonation came. From the waist down she was intact. The rest of her had ceased to exist. There was a pinkish spray on the side of the building, an enormous dished cavity in the door of the convertible. The street was once again at peace.

The people slowly got to their feet. They wore dazed expressions. They licked dry lips and their eyes rolled. Henry sat up, wiped his mouth, stared at Will and began to curse. Jake walked over and picked Martha up. Her eyes opened wide and she struggled.

"It's all over, baby," Jake said thickly. "All over. Cry if you want to."

A MRO came to his feet as he sensed the presence outside his door. The mind exuded an odd effluvium of triumph and peace. He stood, awaiting

the known fate, as the door was unsealed. It swung open and he saw the Chief standing in the corridor. The Chief's eyes were odd. For a moment Amro couldn't understand. Then he remembered having seen children cry. He had never seen a man cry.

The guard, standing at attention in respect for the toga of rank, said, "The orders from Lofta were that the prisoner is to be—"

"I countermand his orders. Amro will come with me."

Amro walked slowly out of the room, faking calmness, his senses alert, waiting for any chance, no matter how remote.

"Walk beside me," the Chief said.

Amro did so. The Chief said when they were out of earshot of the guard, "Do not attempt an escape, Amro. I am helping you."

"What sort of a trick is this?"

"No trick. You told me once that it would be good if I were to walk in the streets of the twin world. And there isn't much time. I'd like to try it."

"What do you mean—not much time?"

"Don't question me, Amro."

They walked past the corridor guards and the Chief took their salutes without response. Amro saw that the guards looked uncertain. He sensed that they were on the verge of objecting. There was a small cold spot in the small of his back as he passed each of them.

The Chief walked too slowly, he thought. He walked like a man in a strange dream. They reached the ramp and started down. "You will show me the twin world, Amro," the Chief said. His voice was gentle.

"So you can plan to spoil it."

"Do you think so?"

"What other reason would you have?"

"That's right. What other reason would I have?"

On the third landing the guard said, "You cannot pass below this level. No one can pass unless I am told by Lofta to permit it."

The Chief lost his odd lethargic manner. He straightened and his lips grew thin. His palm cracked off the guard's

cheek. "Take that to Lofta with my compliments. Stand aside."

The guard hesitated, licked his lips. His cheek was red. He saluted and stood aside. They continued down the ramp.

Hope grew slowly in Amro. Free on Earth he would have a chance. Maybe, if the Earthpeople could be made to believe him, he could help them fight against this thing, this doorway. It would be a losing fight but a good one. For the first time in his life he sensed that something was worth fighting for.

They reached the last corridor, the ground level corridor, stretching to where, at the very end, two agents guarded the switch which controlled the exit to Earth. They studied with interest the two who approached.

"Open the doorway," the Chief said. It was a tone heavy with the custom of years of command, which did not admit of any possibility of disobedience.

An agent dutifully turned and threw the switch. The blank end of the corridor was suddenly darker than any night. The other agent moved into the center of the corridor. "You'll wait for Lofta to send orders," he said.

The Chief was mild. "You know who I am?"

"Of course. But I have known of other agents tested in this manner. And so I shall follow my orders." The deadly blue tube appeared in his hand.

"You would even kill me?"

"Yes sir. I would kill you should you try to pass me."

The black doorway was so near. Amro moved a bit to one side. The blue muzzle flicked in his direction and the agent said, "You have no chance, you see."

It began as a deep heavy vibration, a trembling that was transmitted from the corridor floor to legs and skull. Amro looked quickly at the Chief. The smaller man's head was cocked to one side and he wore the look of one who listens carefully.

"What is that?" the agent demanded.

"You could call it the end of the world," the Chief said. And then, almost to himself, "The Center strikes first."

The vibration became deeper and stronger as though the crust of Strada quivered on the jellied rock underneath. A far-off rumble, like the sound of heavy machines, slowly climbed up through the octaves to a roar, a drone, a whine, a rising, unbearable scream. The whole corridor shook violently, throwing them off their feet. Bits of the wall flaked off, dropped on them as they tried to rise.

And then it was as though a giant's hands grasped the far end of the corridor floor, snapping it like a rug. A section of the roof fell in yards behind them and the white heat slanted through the opening, destroying vision, crisping exposed skin.

Amro struggled to his feet, getting his balance, remaining upright despite the spasms of the corridor floor which lifted him into the air. One of the agents lay still. The other, thinking blindly of duty even at the obvious end, clawed his way up toward the switch.

His hand was inches from it as Amro plunged toward the black doorway. He thought in mid-stride that he was too late. The whole corridor tilted over at a crazy angle as he lunged through the blackness. There was a great pain in his legs and he tumbled over and over.

THEY had stood and watched the oblong of blackness which had so startlingly appeared on the sunlit beach. Henry had raced to the sedan and ordered that a fifty-caliber Browning with a field mount be borrowed from the National Guard arsenal and rushed out to the beach. He returned and stood beside Jake and the others, gun drawn, waiting for what might come out of the blackness.

Jake stood with the cold sweat running down his ribs. Martha stood a little behind and twice he turned and told her to take shelter behind the cars. She appeared not to hear him.

Henry said, "If we get time to get that gun set up we can pepper the hell out of anything that tries to come through."

Jake nodded, sensing the hollowness

of Henry's confidence. It matched his own. He was certain that Henry knew that something could come out of there that would make the machine gun as effective as throwing wild rice at armor plate. But all you can do is try.

All you can do is stand and think of how neat and explicable everything was until all of a sudden you found out that other beings aren't going to come from the distant stars sometime in the unknown future—but out of an obscene blackness right in your own back yard, here and now. And then you know that no matter what you do you aren't ready for them—never were—never will be.

The afternoon radio programs were on, the Texas disc jockeys featuring slightly nasal lonesome cowhands. A commentator was speaking in stern voice of the latest Russian veto and in White Sands they were readying another big one of the booster type, proud of their knowledge, not knowing how feeble and primitive it was. There was unrest on Hawaiian docks and critical acclaim for the new Bergman epic and a novelist's anatomical details banned in Boston. . . .

But here, with the sand yellow-white in the sun, with the porpoises playing in the green water a thousand yards out, with a crab scuttling down toward the breakers, a knot of men and a quiet girl watched the deep and impossible blackness with all the forlorn courage of a Neanderthal village attacking a tank column. Here was the end of a world and its color was black.

Surprise froze them as the figure came tumbling out of the blackness, rolling over and over in the sand. Jake was the first to respond, snap-shooting, the slug kicking up sand near a brown shoulder—and then Martha was in front of him, right in the line of fire, screaming, "No, don't!" as she ran toward the figure on the sand.

The black oblong had canted over to a strange angle, a rectangle standing on one point. With a roar that covered the sound of the sea, with a long upreaching tongue of white flame that dimmed the sun, the oblong disappeared.

The man lay still. Jake recognized him as Quinn French. He said, "Get out of the way and I'll give him one in the head. I can see him breathing."

"Hold it!" Henry snapped.

Martha sat and pulled the man's head into her lap. She stared defiantly at them. "You're not going to kill him!"

She looked down at him as his eyes opened. He looked up into her eyes and, before she had a chance to erect the wall she felt his thoughts in her mind. Joy at her presence, thankfulness, humility. All her doubt and fear was gone.

She said, "This isn't one of them. This is Quinn French. I'm sure of it."

He sat up, got unsteadily to his feet. "One of them looked just like me. I don't understand." He knuckled his forehead.

"They were having some sort of a war among themselves. I escaped in the excitement. I guess I got through just in time. The whole place was exploding. They were smashing their own world."

"They're tricky," Jake said to Henry. "Don't trust him."

"Hey," Amro said, "I'm not one of them. I'm Quinn French. Why don't you check instead of waving those guns. Take my prints. They'll check with the ones the Army took of me. Go get some people who have known me all my life. Have them ask me questions. I don't know what the hell has been going on here. All I know is that it's over. Where are Fran and Jerry?"

"They're dead," Henry said.

"Look. I'm burned. The blisters are coming up. Why don't you stop all this talking and take me to a doctor?"

Martha's hand closed warningly on his. Immediately she felt the thought of reassurance in her mind.

"Right," Henry said, "but you're under guard until we're satisfied."

"That suits me," Amro said.

SOME ten days later Martha and Amro lay on a strip of sand side by side. Three miles away scientists and a detachment of the regular army waited for the reappearance of the black oblong. The whole affair had been carefully kept from public knowledge, due to

the risk of panic. "Marriage," said Amro, "is an interesting custom. A bit primitive, of course, but I find that I approve."

"Males," said Martha, "no matter what world they come from, are insufferable."

He propped himself up on his elbows. His glance was very direct. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make yourself take such a risk? You had to assume that I had grown to believe in the things you believe in—and you also had to assume that I wouldn't suddenly stop looking like Quinn and start looking like a monster."

"I reserve the right to be illogical."

"Be illogical out loud. It isn't good taste to invade your mental privacy."

"Go ahead and invade. I'm not modest."

She bared her mind and he reached in, tasted the strength of her belief in him, the love that was there, the perfect trust. It made him feel proud and humble. Her eyes were wet as she turned to smile at him.

"We must plan," he said. "My people have lost the way to this world. They won't find it again for a long time. Strada is dead. But they will find the way again from another planet, when it is habitable again, from Strada. By that time we must be ready."

"We? I like to hear you say that."

"You have a lot to teach me, Martha. I'm such a miserable amateur at this way of life."

"I think you're doing very nicely."

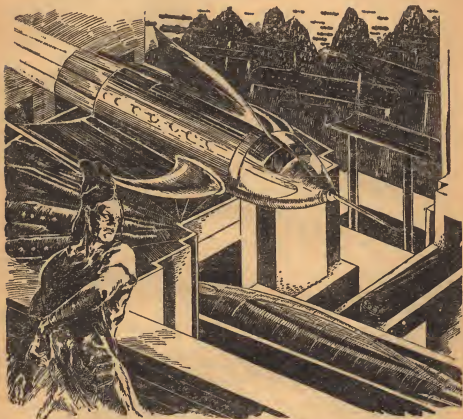
He frowned. "I suppose the best thing to do would be to set up a laboratory. Some of my technical training, even though on Strada it was considered elementary, will lead to things that are new here. First we'll have to get advanced texts so that I can see how much has been done."

"Darling," she said. "So much energy! Don't think about it yet. Not for a little while."

He stared at her and grinned. "So?"

Her blush was violent. "This mind-reading," she said, "takes a bit of getting used to."

The Spaceship Orion Runs Wild Above the Earth!



Near Harsen incoming ships thundered as they landed

TRAFFIC

By **BOLLING BRANHAM**

THE cool ball of light that was the Earth flashed momentarily in the port of the ship, and the ten passengers in the lounge craned their necks to catch a fleeting glimpse.

"Why, it's not impressive at all," simpered the girl from Procyon III. "Our

system is full of bigger and brighter worlds. Isn't that right, Jan?"

The young man by her, whose body was perfectly proportioned, grinned. "I told you about Earth, Sorina. I've seen it too many times on the telecasts not to know it's really an insignificant little

chip of rock. And yet everyone in the Federation still wants to see it for himself."

A smallish, fat man, who had kept his face next to the port until Earth disappeared from sight around the contour of the ship turned back and said: "Folks, that little ball of light looks mighty doggone good to me."

The ten persons turned to look at him. "You've been to Earth before?"

The fat man grinned expansively. "Been there? Heck, I'm a native. Grew up not ten miles from the Land-O-Mat. But I haven't seen Earth for a long, long time. Ten years, it's been."

The ten passengers eyed each other, and looked back at the fat man with mild curiosity. The whole of Earth had a population of only ten billion, a mere mote in a Galactic Empire that included nine hundred thousand billion humans spread through a hundred thousand planets, and a native was still somewhat of a rarity. They did not ask questions, knowing the fat man was going to talk anyway.

"Yeah, I grew up right there in Land-O-Mat City, apprenticed as a controller repairman." He held out his pudgy hands for all to see. "Looking at these fat hands you wouldn't think I could do that work, but I was one of the best they had. I've seen the time ships were stacked up clear back to the Sun, so it seemed, when a tube might blow in Master Approach Control, and all they could do was scream for me. Worked at it for seventy long years, saved my money, and then got to hankering to see some of those worlds where all the ships came from. And I've done it." He grinned. "Been clear to the edge of Hell."

"And you want to go back to Earth—to live?" the girl who had first spoken said incredulously. "I mean, after seeing so many of the other worlds? You know, most of them are so much more beautiful than Earth—" She broke off confusedly.

BUT the little fat man grinned again, cracked his knuckles, turned to the port again as if he could not miss a

chance to see Earth skim by his view again. "Not to me, baby," he said softly, "Not to me." His eyes glistened with the remembrance of ten years of wandering among the stars, but he knew inside of him that there was nothing like home. . . .

A rain like all the other Earth rains for a million years washed down across the miles of concrete that had once been the plains of Kansas, bringing in a freshness and a wetness that was welcome after the boiling heat of that day.

As he stepped off the lift that had brought him up three thousand feet in less than a minute, Kane Harsen walked through the double doors and out of the air-conditioning into that rain, and let it blow on his face for minutes. It wasn't that he considered himself an outdoorsman, it was just that the stuffiness of the little apartment he and Karla shared would sometimes get on his nerves, and it was a little ritual for him to get out under the stars each night before his shift started at midnight. And tonight it had been worse than ever.

He was sure that he was still in love with Karla, for she was quite a person; self-sufficient, clean, hard-working, and able to use every beauty knack there was to keep herself desirable. And she *was* desirable, there was no denying that.

But her voice tonight kept ringing in his ears, "Just a drone, Kane, that's all you'll ever be in your job. They pay you no more than a bare livelihood, for they're afraid you'll save too much and quit. Why in the world don't you try to get in pilot's school? What a life that must be! Traveling to all the stars in the sky, on the move, out there in space where you can get your breath. And the pay! Most pilots retire before they even reach eighty, with enough money to live where and how they please after that. Try it, Kane!"

Kane simply couldn't bring himself to tell her that he *had* tried, but that they had turned him down, that he would never be a pilot. "Just a little heart noise," the doctors had said. "It'll never be anything serious, but you'd be

unsafe in the strains of space." Kane felt grim. That meant he couldn't even be a passenger, was Earthbound till the end of his days. He didn't want to tell Karla. He was afraid it would be the end of her hopes, and then she really would be the devil to live with, or worse still, she would leave him.

A warning light flashed back there over the entrance to the Master Approach Control Room, and Kane sighed: The rain felt good in his face, and he looked out over the concrete ramp. From where he stood the concrete ramp stretched for two hundred miles in each direction, and the part he could see was filled with the flashes of light of the little tow cars that maneuvered the ships after they had made their landings, and put those ships in the right berths.

Kane looked up towards the sky; it was overcast, and yet there were bright reddish glaring flashes that spread through those clouds as incoming ships jockeyed and waited and fired landing bursts downward fighting the gravity of Earth.

There were eighty thousand ships above him, and orbiting around Earth, stacked up out to the Moon, that he had to land tonight. Ships that held cargo for the ten billion persons on Earth; ships that held traveling businessmen who arranged the affairs of 100,000 planets; diplomats, government officials, who hurried back and forth to report to local governments what they had learned on the Mother planet Earth—tourists, and commuters from the Moon.

More than ten thousand ships landing and taking off each hour of that shift, more than 8,000,000 persons who would land tonight and take off for the stars. In any given minute there were nearly two hundred ships settling down on cascading columns of fire in their assigned sections of the ramp, then swiftly they were towed to elevator ramps, lowered, and stowed in the proper berth number of the huge Land-O-Mat. It was a rule that no ship remained on the ramp for more than one minute after landing.

This Land-O-Mat was quite a structure—three thousand feet high, four hundred miles square, it contained numbered berths for a half million ships, and repair facilities equal to that.

Below the ramp, underground, was the huge Land-O-Mat City, with shops that catered to the cosmopolitan tastes of the universe, and below that were the honeycombed tubes of subway entrances where passengers boarded the swift subways that would put them in London, Moscow, Yakutsk, or Antarctica within an hour. No airships traveled between Earth ports; the interplanetary-interstellar traffic was too heavy for that.

KANE sucked in a huge breath of wind and pushed through the entrance to the Master Control Room. Red Stinson, who was Master Approach Control Operator on the shift before Kane, looked up and grinned. "Never worry about you, Harsen," he said. "Always know you're going to be on time and get me out of this mess."

Kane grinned back. "What's the mess tonight?"

Red twisted a dial below the huge screen that was before him, a dial that set a thousand electronic movements in gear, flashing lights, moving magnets, calculating, changing—and out there in space the gyroscopes on a thousand ships moved a millisecond in direction and rocket blasts flared forth.

"The whole of Section Four has got thirty seconds behind in their timing," Red said to Kane. "Nothing serious, but we had to throw in the alternate Section Four computer to handle the additional load of re-calculating the orbits of the thirty thousand ships. And the Section Four alternate computer had not received the final okay from the inspection department. I've been afraid it would go and I would have to order fifteen thousand ships back into Section Five, and fifty thousand ships from Section Five back into hyper-space. You know what that would mean."

Kane said, "Good Grief, man, yes!" Fifty thousand ships back into hyper-

space would upset schedules for a solid week before those ships could be woven back into landing schedules that operated at top capacity all the time. Fifty thousand individual ship owners would lose money because cargoes did not land on time, insurance companies would pay off claims to passengers because of interrupted late landings, space-line operators would be paying final claims five years from now, and a thousand vitriolic objections would pour into the Federation Parliament. The lobbyists would have fresh ammunition for moving the Universal Capital away from an Earth they could claim was antiquated—reverberations from such an occurrence might last for a generation.

More than ever, Kane had the feeling that this entire traffic pattern of landings was a tremendously complicated juggernaut that could not be stopped, and when you mounted it you went with it, unable to control its speed, barely able to avoid disaster by constant nervous vigilance that kept it in its stream. Sometimes Kane felt that one little cog going wrong would cause the whole system to blow up into such utter confusion that the Empire would collapse and men's minds would re-enter a Dark Age. And when your shift started you rode that juggernaut to heaven or hell for eight hours.

But it had a fascination, a moth-to-the-flame attraction for Kane. He sat down by Red, looking over the screen before him, looking over the verniers and the push buttons, and the needles making even patterns on their graphs. It was five minutes yet before his shift started, but he had to have the situation planted indelibly on his mind when Red left it to him.

Red said out of the side of his mouth: "And if that wasn't enough, Senator Gaston and his troupe are scheduled to pay you a visit tonight."

"Gaston! That windbag?"

"Be careful how loud you say that. He's the fair-haired boy in charge of appropriations for this outfit. You know how badly this program needs new equipment and new money. He's facing

tremendous pressure from his home system in Sirius, where they want the Capitol Building, and if he could find a few flaws in our operations, he'd probably be tickled pink."

Karla and the apartment and his dreams faded fast into the distance of Kane's mind, a part of him to be stowed away in a quiet compartment, the lid closed down, not to be opened until the end of the shift. He was something else now, the master of the Approach Control Machines, a king-pin, top-cog, astride a man-made empire of automatic electronic calculators, the man-power necessary to ride the juggernaut—and keep that cog from slipping.

In a few moments, it seemed, Red had said, "So long, pardner, safe landings!" It was the greeting and farewell among traffic control men, and Kane was absorbed then in his screens, and his dials and his push-buttons, and eighty thousand ships coming in.

Theoretically, the machines were perfect and there was nothing left for the Master Control Approach Operator to do. Three square miles of calculating machines absorbing enough electric power to run several cities theoretically controlled and landed every vessel that came to Earth and departed. . . .

THE fat man aboard the starship *Orion*, which decelerated gently and chased the sun around the small, dull planet of Earth, kept one eye cocked on the port, and with the other faced the passengers who still stared at him with mild curiosity, asking polite questions to explain why those little flashes of light that whooshed by the port came so close without hitting them.

"You see," he was saying, "as far as traffic control is concerned, all space is divided into five parts. These five sectors surrounding Earth travel with the Solar System through space, always maintaining their same relative positions to the sun, except Sector One and Sector Two, which maintain their positions relative to the Earth, assuming it does not rotate, revolve, and is the center of the universe."

The fat man was good at reducing abstract theories to practical terms, and he went on telling them: Sector One was a block of the heavens extending one hundred miles straight up from points two hundred miles out around the Land-O-Mat, and it was the final section which ships seeking to land, entered. When ships entered it they were assigned individual sections of their own corresponding to the numbered area on the Land-O-Mat that was theirs, and each ship had an area roughly five miles square in which to settle down.

Sector Two included all the space around Earth in a sphere made by an imaginary line two thousand miles out. Sector Three included everything out to the orbit of the Moon. Sector Four had all the space to the orbit of Mars. Sector Five had all the space out to Pluto.

Beyond Sector Five, the ship did not come under Earth's Traffic Control; the majority of ships traveling beyond Pluto's orbit were in hyper-space where there was no danger of collision. Each ship from anywhere in the Galactic System scheduled to come to Earth filed a Master Flight Plan before leaving, and was assigned a point to enter Sector Five. Upon entering Sector Five, the ship notified Earth Control Station; the Sector Five computer automatically returned an orbit clear of possible collision with other vessels, and the ship stayed under pilot control on that orbit until it entered Sector Four. It had to stay under pilot control, for the time-lag of nearly six hours on communication wave transmission between Earth and Pluto was too great.

Two special stations in Sector Five forwarded entrance schedules for each hour to the Space Station in charge of Sector Four; and Sector Four passed it to the Moon Station which controlled Sector Three; and the subsequent control came from the Land-O-Mat station, which had Master Control over all Station approaches.

In the early stages of automatic control, the time-lag of transmission had been troublesome; a radar fix on a ship

showed where it was a minute, thirty seconds, or a second ago; but now the automatic computer correctly calculated time-lag and gave exact positions in orbit determination. When the pilot entered Sector Three he relinquished control over his ship and the machines made the landings. A ship usually took four days to go from Sector Five to landing, so at peak load, there were nearly one million ships in all Five sectors, with eighty thousand in Sectors One, Two, and Three.

The Master Approach Control Operator was in charge, but one man's mind couldn't keep up with it, and nearly a hundred men worked in charge of the machines of various sectors and their subdivisions.

The passengers on the *Orion* were lulled half to sleep by the dry monotone and the gentle tug of the deceleration at the blood in their bodies, but the girl Sorina, finally said: "But what if the machines fail? What happens then?"

The fat man smiled. "It's all planned for, my dear. When Traffic Control machines fail, there's always some provision for the ships. It's what they call *failing safe*." And he turned to peer from the port again, thinking of being so near to home.

The tension was so great for Kane, and he was so pleasantly and deeply absorbed in the nervous routine, that he realized his name had been spoken three times from behind before he could refocus his attention. The Station director stood behind him with a man who looked so much like a Senator, he could have been nothing else.

"Senator Gaston," the director was saying, "this is Kane Harsen, our Master Approach Control Operator for this shift."

The Senator leaned forward and smiled thinly. "How do you do, Mr. Harsen?" he said with the apparent politeness of the Sirian Worlds.

Kane heard himself mouthing formalities. "Very well, Senator. Things are going quite smoothly, and I've already landed eighteen thousand ships safely tonight."

"You?" The Senator's grin was still thin. "If you can do it alone, will you tell me what the remainder of this huge establishment is doing?"

KANE smiled, realizing his mistake. "Well, Senator, you know the old rib about assigning a man to a task, getting another to watch and see if he does it, and another to watch the watcher, and so on. That's a little bit of what we do here. We never trust anything—machine or man."

The Senator grunted shortly. "H-m-m! Blasted thing looks automatic to me. Always heard these machines could think better than a man. What's the use of having a hundred men on each shift—paying three hundred men those salaries, with everyone screaming for economy?"

Darned little, salaries are costing, Kane thought. Kane himself, as Master Operator, got each week only ten dollars more than the lowest paid operator on the staff. "Well, machines do fail, occasionally, Senator," said Kane. "We'll grant that they can out-think, out-compute, out-visualize any man, for machines have the ability to make an instant integration of a million objects, while a man can't visualize more than three. Yet we see the purpose of machines as that of forming the million details into patterns that a man can grasp, and control."

"But why does a man need to control the pattern? Why can't machines control the pattern too?"

Kane warmed up; he liked the questions. "All right," he said. "As an example, you've got a ship coming out of hyper-space with a crew sick of Cynian leprosy. There is no way that the ship can appeal to a machine for a quick emergency landing, which it needs. Relaying its emergency to a man, it gets attention, orbit recalculation, and comes in far ahead of schedule. That's the kind of service no machine can understand, not being subject to disease."

"Yes, I see that," the Senator said. "But we have scientists in the Sirian system who say they can build a ma-

chine to control even that. It looks to me as though you are caught here with a traffic control system that is neither completely modern, nor completely antiquated, but a mixture of each, and you are unable to change over. Don't you think the answer is to build a completely new system from the ground up?"

Kane set his jaw. "Not if it is based on the complete elimination of manpower. Man put these machines together; true, not any one man, but based on knowledge gained in a thousand years of operations. As long as you have machines, you're going to have to have men to run them, master them."

"That's true, Senator," the director spoke up. "We've found that computers don't limit a man's thinking; they actually increase his ability to think."

Kane added: "A thousand years ago, Senator, man developed crude traffic control systems such as ILS and GCA to aid in getting his airships on the ground. There was a long struggle to see whether responsibility for landing would remain with the pilot or go to the ground man with his instruments, and the ground men won out, for after all, a pilot's job is a mere detail in landing ten thousand ships an hour. Now ground men—skilled and trained ground men—are the most important factors in this system."

The Senator said, "That's still hard to believe."

On the good ship *Orion*, falling in towards Earth in Sector Two of the Master Control Pattern, the fat man was still looking out the port. The deceleration was strong now, but still the passengers had not all gone to their padded bunks and straps.

The words, *fail safe*, were still in the fat man's mind. Sometimes a machine does fail. And in the days of railroading, those first users of automatic block signals that formed the foundation of traffic control, they had used those words. . . . It did not so much matter if a machine failed as long as it *failed safe*. . . . But when eighty thousand ships are coming in for landings, in their little guided, pre-calculated paths from

the Moon to the Earth, a tube may blow, a power source may fail, more likely aboard a ship, and then, it is possible, it may not fail safe.

The only warning the ten passengers had was when the fat man turned and said, "I don't think we're decelerating fast enough."

His words were cut off when a sudden, violent surge of power shuddered throughout the ship, a sidewise thrusting, pushing, mashing motion that pressed him like a limp rag against the wall, where he could feel every little contour, rivet, and bolt pressing into his body. The ten passengers gasped; one man, unable to move his head in the grip it was held, moved his eyes and stared at the broken bones sticking out of the compound fracture in his arm.

AND then the push lessened until they could barely move, and they knew that something was terribly wrong—some acceleration or deceleration that was not in the book—not in the machine.

The Senator was still standing behind Kane when the buzzer sounded and Kane switched on the speaker. "Yes?"

A Sector Two man said quickly, in an even voice: "Gyro Controller on a ship called the *Orion* in Tenth Division, Sector Two, has gone out, Kane. Ship is accelerating and circling Earth in wild, crazy turns."

"You cleared her sector?"

"Yes, we are clearing two sectors, have repairmen checking our machines. But it's on the ship, Kane. Nothing we can do."

"Tell the pilot to go on manual, and we'll give him an orbit back to Sector Three."

"Pilot's dead, Kane. Acceleration killed him in the first thrust. Second pilot is blotto. Communications man is only one of crew able to move."

A tricky problem. The diminishing value of pilots had cut crews to three men and one hostess on passenger vessels. "Doesn't the Comm Man know how to handle controls if we give him instructions?"

"Doesn't act like it, Kane."

Good grief, Kane thought, a crazy ship accelerating and going into crazy turns and orbits in a crowded sector!

"Is there anything regular enough in the turns so that an orbit could be plotted?"

"I don't know, Kane. Gyro's wilder'n Hades. I don't think there's a machine made that could tell what the ship will do."

Kane said, "Well, give it ten minutes clearance on each side, if the machine can move fast enough. I'll call you back."

He switched off the speaker, and thoughts swirled in him. It was the first time in three years that a gyro controller had gone screwy on a ship coming in; this time it was worse with no pilot to take over manual. Now the Sector Two computers were working to clear the space around the crazy ship, trying to turn ships away, weave a pattern of acceleration and deceleration that would not crush humans, feeding information back along the line to other sector computers to hold up, slow up; not crowd into Sector Two.

When a thing as this happened, Kane often got to wondering if this were the lost nail that would lose the shoe, that would lose the horse, that would lose the rider, that would— He shook himself. This would take some thinking. This was the kind of thing that made pilots wish for the good old days when they made their own landings.

A ship with a hundred persons aboard, and the machine could tell you where it was, but not where it was going to be, and no matter how the radar crackled, it couldn't control physical matter, once the *rapport* with the controller was gone.

In three minutes the Sector Two Chief called back. "It's accelerating so fast that I can't clear all the Sectors, Kane! My computer can't handle orbit changes that fast!"

"Throw in the alternate!" Kane said.

The man's voice was peculiarly soft. "All right, Kane."

And Kane knew why the man spoke queerly. The alternate Sector Two com-

puter had recently been repaired too, and no one knew exactly what it would stand.

A long time passed then, and Kane could not think of the crazy ship and its crazy gyrations, for he was filled suddenly with other requests for emergency landings, for changes in general traffic patterns due to meteorite showers—routine business of a traffic control man, the routine business that demanded individual concentrated attention that absorbed every convolution of the mind.

He looked up at the chronometer and saw that he had been on this shift for five hours, that it was suddenly five o'clock in the morning. Then he saw that the Senator was behind him still. The Senator had been standing there in back of him, not speaking, but was just smoking and watching him work. And he saw that the Senator's face was tense and filled with strain. Funny.

The Sector Two man called him and there was now an element of real fear in his voice. "Alternate computer won't handle it Kane, it won't take the power to recalculate the orbit of every ship in Sector Two. I've already caught a mistake—forty-six ships just landed in the east quadrant only thirty seconds after other ships and before the quadrant was cleared. The timing is shot—something is breaking down." The man's voice sounded heavy with strain.

KANE spoke gruffly with an assurance he did not feel. "Take the load off the alternate then, Martin. Don't re-calculate for the *Orion*. If she's clear ten minutes around that'll give me a little time. Connect me with the communications man aboard the *Orion*."

The fat man on the *Orion* could hardly breathe where he was plastered against the wall, and first his mind was thinking ironically, "Ten years of wandering, and I can't quite make it to Earth." Gradually his mind told him that it was the gyro controller that had gone wrong, that this ship was a wild ship without a brain.

It stirred forgotten things in his

mind, forgotten technical knowledge that had been his life. He thought, Why if I could get up to the control room, I might fix the thing.

It took him an hour and a half to get to the control room, and he was cut, bruised and bleeding in a hundred places on the fat little body when he made it there. He lay still on the control room floor for long moments, gasping in the utter exhaustion that had come to him from the strength expended in getting there. He saw the pilot in his seat, the head dangling limply with a broken neck, the co-pilot limp too, with blood coagulated on his head. At the rear of the room he saw the Comm Man too, passed out with the strain. And further back, the bulk of the controller filled the room.

The fat man dragged himself back there, found little tools, a kit of replacement parts, and he thought, I'll be dog-goned! Machines haven't changed a bit! The fat pudgy little fingers, weighed with two gravities, felt into the condensers, and coils, and vacuum tubes, gentle and skillful fingers as they worked with the speed of old but remembered knowledge. . . .

Back on Earth, Kane had been trying for twenty minutes to raise the *Orion* on the screen, when suddenly a fat, bloody face popped on the screen, and a gritty voice said: "What the deuce is the matter with all that machinery down there? Starship *Orion* wants an orbit. Give me a landing."

Kane looked at the face for long minutes, then he exclaimed: "Fat Boy Payne! So you're coming back to Earth."

The fat man looked out of the screen. "Well, Kane Harsen," he said. "Dog-gone you. Haven't seen you since I was a repairman with you in Sector One. Ten years gone since then." The fat man turned. "Give me a landing, Kane. Folks busted up on this ship. Need a doctor. I fixed your little old toy computer on this thing. Give me a landing." He slumped over the screen.

But now it did not matter, for the Approach Control Machines had it in

their grasp again, reached out the thin fingers that controlled matter. But the Sector Two computer was busy sorting out the mess that the alternate had made, and Kane decided to give this one his personal attention. He used a pencil and paper, a slide rule, a simple calculator, did fifteen minutes of brain work and got a landing orbit for one ship of the eighty thousand that would land tonight. When he finished he punched some buttons, gave the figures to the Sector Two man, who would feed them to the controller, and the *Orion* would be on the Land-O-Mat in two hours.

It was only then that a slack, a lull, came and Kane could see the rosy dawn coming up in the heavens of the east. He turned and saw the Senator sitting behind him still.

Kane managed a feeble grin. "Well, Senator, you've seen us work. What do you think of the utility of men, now?"

The Senator had a cigarette in his mouth. His hand reached for it, and Kane could see it was shaking and seized the cigarette and jerked it away in a nervous downward motion. Kane suddenly saw that the man was shaking all over.

"Kane, I hadn't said anything, but my daughter was on the *Orion*; that's the reason I came out here tonight, to meet her. I was going to scorn you, and instead I've sat here sweating with you, feeling like I've melted away to nothing." The Senator smiled wryly. "You'll get your appropriation here, Kane. I think I'll tell my scientists in Sirius they might be able to get ready for this operation in another thousand years. Don't get the idea I think you're perfect, but I don't know, the whole technology of this thing has kind of got under my skin and I know you're running it the only way it can be run."

The Senator stood up. "I've got to go, clean up before my daughter gets in. But let me shake your hand, Kane. I wouldn't have your job for a million credits, and yet I envy you. This thing has got a fascination I'll never forget."

The two men shook hands, and technician and politician bridged a wide

gulf and came to understanding. Then the Senator was gone.

Kane went back to the grind, and at ten minutes to eight, Tor Batson came in and Kane grinned at him. "One good thing about you, Batson," he said, "is that you're never late—always on time to get me out of this mess."

Batson grinned. "What's the mess this morning?"

QUIETLY Kane told him. And then at one minute after eight he dragged himself away and went outside to look at the morning. The ramp stretched as far as the eye could see, and ships thundered down, the cars pulled them, the elevators lowered them. The rain had cleared away except for little puddles in the uneven places, and the hot sun said it was going to heat up again.

Kane was so tired that he felt his eyes bulging out, and yet somehow a feeling of relaxation was sliding over him. It was a feeling that came to him every morning after his shift, a feeling that made him know this work was right for him. He had seen them carrying away operators who had become nervous wrecks with the strain, and yet he knew that the deep grinding pull at his nerves was what he loved. The Senator had spoken right when he said it got under the skin. Suddenly Kane knew that he hadn't wanted ever to be a pilot, a chauffeur, being only a tiny cog in a huge system. He squared his shoulders, and walked to the lift.

On the way home, he opened a mind compartment where he had stored his homelife, his memories of Karla, his troubles, and began taking them out. Into another compartment went the Controller, the machines, and eighty thousand ships, where they would stay quietly until midnight tonight.

Karla was up when he came in, doing her sleeping while he worked. She was in a breakfast robe at the table, drinking coffee. Kane kissed her, and noticed she was more responsive than usual. He yawned, then suddenly saw the piece of paper lying on the table before her.

REJECTION OF APPLICATION FOR PILOT'S TRAINING, it read.

Karla picked up the paper and waved it at him. "It came in the mail," she said. "When I saw it was from the Pilot Selection Board, I thought maybe your application had been accepted and I couldn't help opening it, Kane."

He stared at her, wondering at what things were in her mind.

"Well?"

She smiled, then yawned, and swept her honey blonde hair back with a hand. "Well—nothing," she answered. "You weren't a pilot when I married you, were you? The minute I thought you were accepted I realized I didn't want it, that there's something about you, the way you are now, that I love, and don't want changed." She came over and kissed him.

Kane laughed until he felt silly. He

ate breakfast with his wife, then went to bed and slept with the peaceful smile of a man whose life is full.

A girl named Sorina dragged her weary bones out of the first-aid station that treated her bruises and wailed at the perfectly proportioned man who stood beside her: "But I simply never would have come to Earth, Jan! It's such a dull world, and they said the trip was so simple."

A fat man with a few bandages on limped into the Master Approach Control Room, looked at the long rows of clicking machines, the flashing lights, the subdued hum of terrific electronic power flashing out into space and bringing in ships from Procyon, and Centaurus, and the Dog Star and the rim of the Milky Way—and the fat man grinned and sighed a long contented sigh.

"It's sure great to be home," he said.



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G. S. Foster

Sam saw the native's
skull was crushed

THE CHALLENGE

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

WITH the conviction growing in him that trouble was dead ahead but without being able to put his finger on its source, Sam McArdle returned to the ship. He had gone out to the inhabitants of this planet as an ambassador of good will, a not unimportant mission in view of the fact that the *Lyrane III* had landed in the exact center of a huge

park in the middle of their largest city but also in view of the fact that the ship would certainly be laid up here until the screen generators could be repaired. Until she was repaired, the *Lyrane III* would be somewhat at the mercy of the Congers. McArdle tried to imagine the meaning of mercy to them, an effort which left him with consider-

Like Man—Even Machines Are Sometimes Fallible!

able heaviness in his mind.

In the control room, Ed Vetch, his executive officer and second in command, said, "Well, what about it?"

McArdle eased himself into a chair and shook his head. "I don't like it," he said.

Vetch lifted an eyebrow. "Unfriendly?"

"Un-reacting," Sam answered.

"Huh?"

"They just don't react," Sam explained. "They're not friendly, nor are they unfriendly." He twisted uncomfortably in his chair, seeking the reason for this attitude on the part of the Conger race, spoke what seemed to him to be the astonishing truth. "They weren't even surprised when we landed."

"Huh?" Vetch was astonished too. "Then space travel is an old story to them."

"Nope," Sam said. "This is the first space ship they have ever seen and we are the first inhabitants of any other world who have ever landed here." He looked out through the view port to make certain again that the *Lyrae III* was not surrounded by an excited mob of exceedingly curious people come to see this marvel, a ship from another world. There wasn't a soul out there in the park.

"My gosh, what's wrong with 'em?" Ed Vetch breathed.

"That's what worries me," Sam answered.

"Maybe they're just morons," Vetch suggested, but with no real conviction in his voice.

Sam nodded toward the view port. Out there, beyond the vast park in which the ship had come to rest, was a magnificent city. Tier on tier, it floated away into the thin air of this planet, the product of a swarming race whose technology in many respects was equal to or better than the technology of earth.

SAM had seen the people too. In many respects, they duplicated the human race. Except that they weren't curious. Art, they had, and an apprecia-

tion of beauty which was revealed in the sparkling lakes, the winding walks, the flowered paths of this park, and in an even greater degree in the architecture of the city itself. The people who had constructed this city were not morons.

"Maybe the present bunch came along later, conquered the city builders, and took over," Vetch said.

"No. They built the city. From what I gathered, there is no conquering or being conquered here."

"Uh?" Vetch said. "It almost sounds like heaven."

"Almost," Sam McArdle answered. He was silent, thinking. Back on the Earth from which they came, conquering and being conquered were largely gone too. Except for a few primitive regions where native tribes still made sporadic raids for women or cattle, following a culture pattern that was slowly dying out, the day of the conqueror was gone. Once with his legions and his blitzes and his techniques of economic penetration, he had strutted across the surface of the earth. But no longer.

Earth was peaceful now, a minor, not-worth-fighting-for pawn in a bigger game. The conqueror had not disappeared, he had just grown bigger. His ambition included solar systems, the star cluster off yonder. Knowing something of the destruction, the pain, the denial of decent living, the denial of life itself, that went along with the conqueror, McArdle thought longingly of a world where there was no conquering or being conquered. He twisted, uncomfortable and uneasy, and looked up into the bright eyes of Vetch.

"There's something wrong with peace," he said.

"Such as?"

"Such as a nervous system that has evolved within the framework of a way of life that included the challenge and the response, the conqueror and the conquered. Take out the challenge and you have taken out the steam that makes the human jigger go. There's something wrong here on this world, something that I don't understand, and maybe don't like." His voice trailed into un-

easy silence as he sought a definition for what was wrong.

"Such as?" Vetch said encouragingly. Like a reflex gesture echoing the uneasiness within him, Sam McArdle shrugged expressive shoulders. "Such as I don't know," he said. "But I do know one thing that I want to get this crate away from here. Put every man to work repairing the screen generators and plugging up that hole in the nose."

"Right," Vetch said. Operating within the framework of a discipline that approached the ultimate in avoiding frictional losses resulting from a clash of personalities, the executive officer moved quietly to obey his orders, leaving the captain alone. The officers and the crew of this ship had been so carefully picked, so carefully fitted together into a matrix, that discipline was not needed.

Sam McArdle was technically Captain McArdle, but there wasn't a man on the ship who didn't call him Sam and didn't obey him utterly. If in the background the ghosts of ancient surface navies shook their heads at calling the captain by his first name, swearing that such familiarity would breed contempt and result in a loss of discipline, this ghostly gnashing of teeth did not in the least disturb the functioning of the personnel of the *Lyrane III*.

Nor had the sharp but short spurt of fighting between this wandering scout vessel and its equivalent from the conqueror now trying to establish himself within the system of Messier 33 disturbed the functioning of the crew. A part of a much vaster navy, their mission was to scout, to fight if necessary. The first they did with aplomb, the second within the limits of their supply of ammo. If hurt, they crawled up somewhere to lick their wounds into shape for flight back to the nearest base. If killed—well, death was nature's greatest invention, wasn't it? And the fight against it was life's greatest and most interesting gamble.

Coming from the nose of the ship, Sam McArdle was aware of bumps and pounding sounds. He didn't like to re-

pair that hole in sight of the inhabitants of this planet—such a repair was an admission that the ship was not spaceworthy—but the hole itself was also such an admission and he could see no way he could hide the hole from anybody who wanted to look. The catch was, nobody wanted to look.

TURNING to the port, he saw that the ship had at last gained one curious onlooker. But this one wasn't very curious. All he did was squat in the shade of a tree and stare at the activity going on before him. McArdle let his mind run back over his conference with the Congers.

When he had descended from the ship, three natives had been waiting for him, patiently, as if he were a train running a little behind schedule. They had made signs to him that they were friendly and he had made signs back. Communication had posed no problems. The three Congers had brought two gadgets with them, one a little black box which they consulted constantly but which they did not let him examine, the second a device that made telepathy possible.

He had been fascinated with the telepathy gadget and the three Congers had patiently waited for his enthusiasm to wear off—like adults waiting for a child to tire of a new toy, he had thought. They had brought the telepathy gadget with them as if they had anticipated it would be needed, which had made him a little uneasy. So far as he could tell, they anticipated too damned much.

They had conducted him directly to Mr. Big himself, Valdar, or something like that, had been Mr. Big's name. Valdar had received him graciously and again he had had the impression that he was running right on schedule. He had intended to ask permission to land but this permission had been given before it was asked, leaving him with the feeling that Mr. Big had known what he was going to ask. The entire interview had proceeded with ceremonious dullness and he had gotten the impression that he and Valdar were actors

reading a prepared script. As he talked with the human, Valdar had constantly consulted a small black box into which was built some sort of a screen.

The landing of the *Lyrane III*, marking a new age, with space travel now possible, space commerce, and new ideas by the gross, should have impressed Mr. Big. Sam had thought. But Mr. Big hadn't been impressed. He had been bored. The council of attending advisors had been bored. The pages and servants around the throne had been bored. Every man on the whole blasted planet had probably been bored.

To Sam McArdle, this had been galling. Hatred of a stranger, distrust, an effort to kill him, he could have understood, but boredom never. Didn't they understand he had come from a world far out in space?

Yes, they understood it well enough. Valdar had yawned. Sam McArdle had come back to the ship with a feeling of acute discomfort.

Looking from the port, he saw the little Conger still squatting under his tree. Like all the others, he was consulting a little black box, and like them he was apparently bored stiff.

Behind him, the door opened. Vetch entered. "They're setting up scaffolding now," the exec reported. "The best guess is that maybe the job will be done in seventy-two hours. Here is what has to be done." McArdle listened patiently, then stopped listening as a junior officer began shouting in the passageway outside. "Ed! Ed! Where are you?"

Ed Vetch jumped to open the door. "Here. What's up?"

"Trouble. We were setting up the scaffolding. Something slipped, I don't know what, and the scaffold fell."

"Then set it up again," Vetch said.

"Sure." The junior hesitated. "The trouble is—it fell right on top of a native."

"Huh?"

"He's deader'n a fish."

"Come on, Ed," Sam McArdle said. They went on the double.

The scaffolding was tubular steel. In normal use, the bars were used as hand-

holds on the walls of the ship, but they had been designed so that in an emergency, they could be screwed out of place and used to construct a scaffold. The scaffold had gone up about twenty feet, then had fallen. The men working on it had jumped to safety. Under it, his skull crushed, was the native that Sam had seen sitting under a tree. Five crewmen of the *Lyrane III* were clustered around him. No one else was in sight. Under him, as crushed as his skull, lay the little black box he had been studying.

"We thought we had it anchored all right but the ground turned out to be soft and one of the legs sank," a crewman reported.

"Uh-huh," Sam said. "How'd he happen to be under it when it fell? The last I saw of him, he was sitting under a tree."

"The last time I noticed him, he was sitting there too," the crewman answered. "But just before the scaffold fell, he got up and walked over here. As it started to fall, he started to run—*straight toward it.*"

SAM stared at the crewman in bewilderment. Then he frowned. "Did you yell at him to get away?" he asked.

"I nearly screamed my lungs out."

"Did he hear you?"

"He didn't want to hear me. He saw the scaffold falling, he ran under it, stopped, and looked up at it as it fell on top of him."

"Jumping jeepers!" Ed Vetch breathed. "What was he trying to do—commit suicide?"

"That's apparently what he did," Sam McArdle said. Irritation rose in him. Whether the native had died by accident, intention, or as a result of some obscure motivation that no human mind might be able to understand, did not alter the fact that he was dead and that some reaction could be expected from his fellows. Sam McArdle did not anticipate that the Congers would pass out medals for the death of one of their fellows. What would the Congers do about it?

"Did anyone see this?" he questioned. "So far as I know—no," the crewman answered.

"Then carry him into the ship and reset the scaffold," McArdle decided. "Act as if nothing unusual has happened. If anyone turns up to ask questions, send for me. When the repair job is completed, we'll report to the authorities."

"Okay, Sam." They carried the little native into the ship and out of sight. The scaffold was reset, safely this time, and work was resumed. Three Congers were observed walking leisurely across the park toward the ship.

"It's the same three that met me the first time," McArdle said.

"Do you suppose—" Vetch said, then was silent.

The three Congers arrived. Dressed in flowing robes, they looked a little like three Greeks from the Age of Pericles. One carried the telepath. The second carried the little black box. The third carried nothing. He bowed. The telepath was adjusted.

"This ship has thirty minutes in which to leave the planet—for good," the third one said.

"What?" McArdle said.

"The ship has thirty minutes in which to leave."

"Huh? I mean—why? We were given permission to land."

"But you were not given permission to cause death."

"Eh?"

"You erected or caused to be erected an unstable structure which resulted in the death of one Sar Klusion."

"Ah-ha!" Ed Vetch breathed. "They know."

"But—" McArdle said. "It was an accident. We couldn't help it. In effect, he committed suicide."

"There are no accidents," was the calm answer. "All is the result of design. One unwavering purpose flows through every action."

"What?" Sam said. A man by the name of Freud had once held that there were no accidents, that what seemed to be accidental was in reality an expression of the unconscious wish of the in-

dividual concerned. Was this what they were trying to say? He tried to explain: "He deliberately ran under the falling scaffold. Our men tried to stop him. We did everything we could." He might as well have been talking to the empty air for all the reactions he got from the three Congers.

"If you are not gone within the allotted time, we will show you what will happen," they said.

The black box was produced and for the first time he was allowed to examine it. Set within one side was an opaque screen like the screen of a television set. "What is that thing?" he said.

He got no answer. The second Conger bent over the box, tuning it much as a radio set is tuned, to some distant broadcasting station. A picture appeared on the screen, the image of the *Lyrane III* at rest in the park.

"You will now see what will happen," the third Conger said.

The screen showed the crew of the *Lyrane III* making hasty preparations for departure. The scaffold was pulled down. The ports were closed. With the hole in the nose still unrepaired, the ship rose hastily into the air. The screen showed it vanishing in the sky overhead.

THE image was so nearly perfect that the astonished captain had to steal a hasty side-glance to make certain his ship was still there. Then the screen revealed nothing.

"The ship is now beyond the scope of futusyn," the third Conger said. "It is gone, forever. Thus you have one choice—to depart. Your second choice is to stay here. Let me show you what will happen if you elect this alternative."

The black box was retuned. Again a picture appeared on the screen, the ship. The *Lyrane III* remained where she was beyond the time limit allotted for departure. Preparations for defense were made, but they were futile. The ship was suddenly struck by explosive missiles. Holes appeared in the hull and heavy explosion took place inside. Ed Vetch and several of the crewmen stum-

bled out, the "exec" apparently wounded. Then the ship was quiet. No movement was visible. On the screen time seemed to telescope itself so that years moved by in the space of a single second. Rust appeared on the hull, in great brown patches, shrubbery grew up around the ship, hiding it.

Ed Vetch whistled softly. Sam McArdle studied the screen with frantic interest. Again the illusion was so real that he had to look toward the ship to make certain it was still there. "Either we leave within thirty minutes—or we never leave? Is that the idea?"

"That is the choice you have," he was told.

"But supposing I don't like either?"

"You will accept one or the other. What you like is not important."

"Eh? You're sure of that?"

"Very sure."

"But this thing—" He pointed to the black box within which the screen was now blank. "What is it? How does it work?"

He got no answer. Instead the third Conger bowed politely, the second picked up the black box, and the third turned off the telepath. Like actors following a prepared script, they walked away. Sam McArdle and Ed Vetch watched them go. Vetch made a gesture toward the pistol holstered at his hip. McArdle shook his head. Vetch sighed. "We've just had an ultimatum," Vetch said.

"I know. But it doesn't do any good to use a gun on messengers. Their authority comes from higher up. You've got to get to Mr. Big before you can get anything done."

"But how can we get to him?"

"By being invited. In this case, we haven't been."

"Well?"

Sam shook his head. "We're bucking up against something that is too big for us, something we don't understand. We don't dare tackle it. We're going to take the first choice offered us—to get out of here."

"But the screens?"

"They will either hold until we get to another planet—or—" He paused, con-

sidering the condition of the screen generators and the utter and appalling necessity of these screens as a protection against meteors in space."

"Or?" Vetch urged

"Or they won't hold."

"In that case?"

"We'll try to get Mr. Big to invite us to see him," Sam McArdle said.

Well within the allotted time limit, the *Lyrane III* lifted from the surface of this strange planet. She went easily and safely through the atmosphere, the hole carefully blocked off behind air-tight doors. When she reached the limits of the atmosphere, and lost the protection of that air blanket, the screen generators came on. They wailed softly and Sam McArdle and every member of the crew held their collective breaths. The planet was a dwindling globe far below them when the generators blew and all over the ship, alarm bells began ringing. There was no going on.

"Prepare to issue a calling card formally requesting an audience with Mr. Big," Sam McArdle said, grimly. . . .

IN THE throne room of the Conger race, Valdar sat staring at the dual screen in front of him. It was divided neatly into two sections. One section revealed the projection from futusyn, the other section revealed the reality as it was gathered by scanning equipment. On both screens the strange ship from some other world was visible. On both screens it was disappearing into the space above the planet. While he watched, it disappeared from both screens. He turned the knob that accelerated the time rate on the futusyn screen.

The screen remained blank. The ship, then, would not return.

Valdar sighed. He began again considering the importance of the date 3731, the ninth month, the third day, at three hours and twenty minutes past sunset, in the time reckoning scheme of the Conger race, and what would happen then, and he considered setting the equipment so that again he could watch it happen, then decided against it. No,

he did not wish to see it again. He was sick and tired of that date 3731. In the bottom of his soul, he wished he had never heard of it.

He stared at the dual screens. Every home on the planet had such a system, both screens working from the vast control dome here in this city. In addition, each individual usually had one of the small black boxes with the single screen attuned to futusyn only. The net effect of the total system was to control the life of every inhabitant of the planet.

When futusyn had been invented and put into use, it was hailed as the ultimate achievement of Conger science. And it had seemed to be exactly that, for a time. Certainly, by revealing the choices open to every individual, and the consequences of these choices, it had achieved complete stability in the social structure. There was a price, of course, for their achievement. In the dark depths of his mind, Valdar was finding that price excessive. Suddenly he sat up, staring with pop-eyed horror at the radar screen that was reporting reality.

On that screen, the ship had reappeared.

On the futusyn screen—nothing.

If the ship was back, futusyn was no longer to be trusted. Futusyn had plainly said it would not come back. At the thought, Valdar's mind began to turn frantic somersaults. For the first time since futusyn had been perfected, Valdar yelled for his councilors.

They came running. Mutely he pointed at the two screens.

The scientists on his staff looked and looked again and said in effect what the blazes made here? The philosophers looked and looked again and said this was not possible. The generals looked and looked again and said this was an optical illusion, that either the scanning equipment was defective or it was picking up some unusual object that looked like a ship, but obviously wasn't.

As though trying to avoid possible attack, the object that looked like a ship moved with lightning speed. From it, a small object was observed to detach itself and to follow a guided course down

toward the surface of the planet.

"Can that be a bomb?" an appalled scientist asked.

"It only *looks* like a bomb," a general answered. "It is actually nothing; some strange configuration of light rays."

This strange configuration of light rays hit the surface of the planet. A huge mushroom of white flame spouted upward. Followed a roar that seemed to shake the foundations of the planet. The ground rolled in waves. In the immediate vicinity where it struck was tremendous destruction. Luckily—or was this design?—it struck in an unpopulated area, a region that futusyn had said would one day be devoted to the building of a gigantic amphitheater. It constructed part of that amphitheater—the hole in the ground part.

In front of Valdar and his councilors both screens went blank as the blast jarred sensitive equipment out of operation. As sweating technicians, suddenly called to a task that had not been anticipated for them, hastily repaired the radar equipment, Valdar and his councilors waited. When the equipment had been repaired and they saw the hole in the ground, horror appeared on their faces. Such titanic destruction as this they had never witnessed. Nor had they ever anticipated witnessing it. Hence—horror. Then a little by a little horror began to go away.

VALDAR felt flow through him such a release of tension as he had never known in his life. From some hidden well within him, new energy seemed to surge in waves. In the tense room somebody whispered. "Some new, some completely unpredictable factor must have entered the equations."

"Wonderful," Valdar said.

At first, they thought he had gone mad. Then as they realized what he meant, smiles began to appear around the room. From somewhere off in the distance there came a roar. The aroused populace had seen what had happened and were taking such immediate action as seemed advisable. A signal aide hurried into the room. "The ship, Sire, is

trying to communicate with you."

"Good," Valdar answered. "What do they want?"

The aide was embarrassed. Such language, such thoughts as he had heard from the ships were unbecoming in the presence of Mr. Big. But it was his duty to report exactly. "They asked, Sire, if we are willing to sit still and let them repair their screens, or do we want another dose of the same medicine?"

Valdar permitted a grin to appear on his face. "Tell them," he answered, "that we will be very happy to sit still."

Outside the palace the roar grew louder. Moving to the window Valdar saw thousands of people fighting each other to get into a huge domed building across the way. An hour earlier this sight would have filled him with horror. Now he observed it with equanimity, even with satisfaction. . . .

Sweating, Sam McArdle set the ship down in the same spot it had occupied before. He turned to face Ed Vetch. "Round two goes to us. I want every man in the ship on the job of repairing the generators."

"You bet," Vetch said. He issued the necessary orders, then turned to his chief. "Scared of round three, Sam?"

"I don't want there to be any round three," McArdle answered. "We're out of calling cards, you know."

"I know," Ed Vetch said.

The crew of the *Lyrane III* were busier than the bees from forty hives when the deputation arrived from the Conger people. "The Big Shot himself," the lookout reported.

"Answering our invitation," Sam said. "Let's go talk."

Valdar, his councilors and his aides waited outside the ship for the humans to put in an appearance. Sam and Ed took their time. They put on their best uniforms, digging gold braid from long unused lockers. They armed themselves. As if they were in no hurry whatsoever and no importance of any kind could attach to this meeting, they strolled down to meet Mr. Big and his boys.

Mr. Big was smiling. So were the boys. Off somewhere in the city there

was a roar as of many voices. Mr. Big was not concerned about this roar. Nor was Captain McArdle and Executive Officer Vetch.

"We are pleased to co-operate with you in every possible way," Valdar said. "We will supply technical help, materials, anything you wish."

"That's nice," Captain McArdle said.

"Food, supplies, anything you require," Valdar continued.

Captain McArdle nodded as if this was just exactly what he had expected.

"In addition, as soon as it may be convenient, we also wish to establish regular commerce with your race."

"Granted," Captain McArdle said. There was sweat on his face. He wished he could wipe it away but decided against trying. This full, complete co-operation worried him more than defiance. Were these jokers leading him on? Did they know the real condition of the ship? Where were their little black boxes that knew everything?

"We also wish—ah—to express our gratitude for the—ah—explosion," Valdar continued.

At the question, Captain McArdle instantly became Sam again. "Huh? Gratitude? What do you mean?" He caught himself and tried to force himself back again into the character of Captain McArdle. It was a character transformation he could not quite manage. "I don't understand this. A little while ago you were giving us choices. Now you are expressing your gratitude. What makes here?"

VALDAR told him about futusyn. If anything, his astonishment grew greater. "Do you mean to tell me you have developed a method of forecasting the future?"

"I do mean that," Valdar answered.

"And that right down to the last final detail of a man's life, you can tell what is going to happen to him."

"Yes. Futusyn synthesized the various factors operating on him, combined them with his total personality, indicated the various choices he had, and the results of each. When your ship landed

here, it forecast that one individual would be killed in an accident, and that as a result of this accident, you would be forced to depart, never to return."

"This Sar Klusion who got under the scaffold, he knew it was going to fall?"

"He did."

"Then why didn't he get out of the way?"

"Because he couldn't, Valdar explained, "That was the way it was intended to be. He couldn't stop it."

"Nonsense," Sam gasped. "You haven't been forecasting the future of your people, you've been hypnotizing them!" He broke off quickly. To him, unconscious hypnosis seemed a more rational explanation than forecasting the future, but was this the right theory? After all, futusyn had said the ship would leave, and it had left! It had come back of course, but he remembered only too clearly why and how that decision had been made. He stared at Valdar. Mr. Big was looking mighty pleased. "I don't get it," Sam said. "You look too happy about this."

"I am happy," Valdar said. "Futusyn has put a curse on us. It has forecast every action of our lives, including the day we would each die. In my case that day occurs in Thirty-Seven-Thirty-One—" Hastily he changed the tense, "It was scheduled to occur in Thirty-Seven-Thirty-One."

"Was scheduled?" Sam whispered.

Valdar jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the roar that was still coming from the city. "It won't do any more forecasting," he said. "When it was proved wrong once, my people seemed to feel they should take matters into their own hands. They're over there now destroying the machines. From the sound, I judge—" Valdar groped for a strange thought impulse to express what he felt, groped and found it. "I judge they're having a mighty good time doing it."

From ear to ear, Mr. Big grinned. From ear to ear, the councilors with him grinned. From them an incubus had been lifted. Now they would no longer know what choice they had every minute of their lives. To them was restored

—the challenge of the next moment.

Sam McArdle stared at them. He would have liked to have seen those marvelous machines that made futusyn operate, whether they actually forecast the future or hypnotized their users into that belief did not matter. They would have been well worth study. On second thought, however, he decided this was a privilege he would well afford to forego. "Very well," he snapped, again in the character of Captain McArdle. "Your requests are granted. The audience is ended." Still grinning, Valdar and his councilors walked away.

Back inside the ship, Sam McArdle faced Ed Vetch. "I gather," Vetch said slowly, "that this futusyn was some kind of a mechanical and mathematical brain that took into account all known factors, made allowance for the unknown factors, synthesized the result, and forecast the future."

Sam nodded.

"And when it failed, it made everybody happy, including us?"

"Including definitely me," Sam said.

"But the thing I want to know," Vetch continued, "is what it would have forecast if certain unknown factors had been available to it?"

"Such as?"

"Such as the factor of the collapse of our screen generators and the factor that without screens, we could not cross space?"

"I don't know," Sam answered.

"And what would it have forecast if it had had available the information that we had only one atomic projectile left over after our last fight, that when we had shot off our big stick, we were capable of no further offensive action."

"I don't know that either," Sam answered. "I don't want to know it. Shut up now and let me rest." He sighed. Remembering the look of gratitude on Valdar's face, an expression which had indicated that an intolerable burden had finally been lifted, he knew there was one thing he did not want to know—the future.

Let the next moment bring on its challenge! That way a man stayed alive.



First Person Singular

a novelet by **ERIC FRANK RUSSELL**

CHAPTER I

New Planet

THE new planet could be seen as a dark disk surrounded by a glowing nimbus. Its halo was created by the small red sun burning far behind it. There were other spheres in this same locality, some with many satellites and one—a glorious sight—with multi-colored rings. Sensed by the instruments, although not from this angle evident to the eyes, was a dangerous belt of rocks rushing helter-skelter through the void and forming the reef of the stars.

Quivering and red-tailed, the long particle-scarred space-ship had tilted high above the reef and was now heading for the nimbus. There was another smaller paler halo near to the objective, sharing its orbit, indicative of an almost airless moon.

Seated behind the bow observation port, Captain Rafel twisted around as Edham came into the cabin. He said, "I summoned you forward, thinking you might like first view. It has just expanded sufficiently for straight vision." He

pointed into the sparkling darkness. "There it is."

Taking a seat beside the commander, Selected Granor Edham looked at the thin circle shining upon the backdrop of creation. The picture was unsatisfactory in that it told little. All the same it meant enough. It was a dim, ghostly lamp marking the end of his trail.

It represented the purpose for which he had been chosen and, for all he knew, the specific function for which he had been conceived and born. That faraway light, pale, wan and beckoning, surrounded the hidden fact of fate. It marked the site of death or glory. It was the cradle—or the grave.

His young, strong and decidedly stubborn features did not change expression while his gaze remained leveled forward. Rafel was watching him and he was aware of the scrutiny but this had nothing to do with his grim phlegmaticism. Either he was peculiarly insensitive or had superb control of his emotions, for he gave Rafel nothing to



**Edham was a trained interplanetary pioneer,
but even he and his chosen mate were unable
to make their world a fit place to live in!**

go by. His face remained set, just a little cold, a little forbidding, and his eyes were steady, unwinking.

RA FEL said quietly, "We'll be there in about two hundred tempors by the clock." He waited for comment, watching, watching. There was no remark, not even the quirk of an eyebrow. The other's countenance might have been carved in rock. Rafel went on, his manner verging upon the paternal, "You speak but seldom. Once I saw you smile and that I shall always remember. I have never heard you laugh."

"I do my laughing inside myself."

"But not often," pursued Rafel. "Not as frequently as others do."

"Not all are the same," Edham observed.

"Of course not. There are differences. So long as we can lay claim to be individuals there must be differences. Therefore some laugh and some weep."

In the same even unaccentuated tones, Edham asked, "Have you wept?"

Rafel leaned back in his air-cushioned seat and eyed the stars. He had thin aquiline features and the large luminous optics of the highly intelligent. The eyes were upon the stars without seeing them.

"Six times or perhaps seven. Please do not ask me when, where or why."

"I have not the slightest desire to do so. One cannot seize part of another man's heart." For the first time Edham showed hint of expression, no more than a narrowing of the eyes, a slight hardening of the jaw muscles. "But if ever the time comes to weep for me it would be well to remember something."

"Such as?"

"I shall be laughing."

Rafel said soberly, "I hope you will, I hope you will." He hesitated, continued, "No one sees himself truly pictured in the mirror of another's mind. Sometimes one is given to wonder how one looks."

"Has one the faults and virtues of which he is conscious or do his fellows see some faults as virtues, some virtues as faults? Do others see additional fac-

ulties not apparent to their possessor? I am the captain of my ship but what sort of a captain am I to my crew—good, bad or indifferent?"

"It is of little consequence. The shape is set."

"Bear with me. I am leading up to something. Do you mind if I put a personal question?"

"I mind nothing," said Edham. "Would I be where I am, going where I'm going, if I had cares, susceptibilities?"

"You are treading my conversational path a little ahead of me," Rafel told him. "What I would like to ask you is this—have you ever suspected yourself of unsociability?"

"I do not suspect it—I know it." Edham turned his head, looked straight at him. "During and since childhood I have not mixed quite as others have mixed and such mixing as I have done has been done self-consciously. Sometimes I have wondered whether it is an inferiority complex or sheer unsociability."

"I console myself with the thought that I am not anti-social. I like and enjoy my fellows—providing there are not too many at one time. I have never liked crowds." His dark gray orbs studied Rafel. "Why do you ask?"

The other gave him a slow smile. "You console yourself because you think your character at fault or suspect that others consider it faulty. Is it a true flaw?" He waved his hand at the enveloping cosmos. "In the big cities, perhaps. Out here, no! Out here it is a virtue."

Edham said nothing.

"You are a Selected Granor," Rafel pointed out. "A chosen son born under the sun called Di. Selection is not based on idle whims. It is a careful sifting from the mass of Di's children, a sorting out of the hardy pioneering types, the ones who may be restless, out-of-place, unsocial in the cities."

"But on the loneliest frontiers—ah!" He spread expressive hands. "There, they come into their own. They are independent, self-reliant, they do not mourn for the comfort of the crowd."

Edham offered no remark.

"In the College of Granors is a great obelisk bearing eighteen hundred honored names," Rafel mused reminiscently. "I have read them as doubtless you have read them. Every man-jack was much like you."

"That is gratifying," Edham offered it with glum humor as if he were laughing inside of himself. His gray eyes met Rafel's again. "Because every man-jack is dead."

The nimbus had grown to sky-filling size and had resolved itself to an atmosphere heavily clouded. There was a blaze of crimson light and an awful roaring and a frantic scattering of thunderheads as the space-ship came cautiously through the blanket. A huge saucer-like object, fat in its center, thin at the edge, the ship lowered amid a spume of fire.

Jungle below sent up trunks and fronds and greeny reaching arms. Steam came from it and vegetable warmth and cloying odors mingled with the stench of noisome things rotting in the dark. Living shapes came up with the vapor and the smells, flying, fluttering, flapping away, some dexterously, some with the ungainly awkwardness of creations ill-conceived, some with shrill screechings or harsh cries.

Other entities that could not fly, land-bound and raging, slung or blundered through the undergrowth and howled their hatred at each other and at the monster in the air.

FOR a little while the vessel hung half a mile above hell, uncountable miles below heaven. The superheated clouds it had thrust aside had now swung back together, closing the gap and sending down a torrent of warm rain.

The downpour made an angry rattle on the space-ship's topside and venturis bellowed and the jungle screamed. More clouds in the distance, black and bloated, were drifting to the aid of their fellows, rumbling from time to time and casting vivid shafts across the sky.

Planetary Surveyor Jolin was in the

underbelly blister when Edham joined him. Together they looked down upon the wetness and the tangled green.

"You can blame me for this," said Jolin. "I pronounced it possible. Every time I declare a planet to be possible the decision fidgets within my conscience."

"That is natural," Edham soothed. "Since you will not live long enough to see the end result you must feel the weight of uncertainty. But why worry? No man can do more than his best."

"I have seen failures," Jolin observed moodily. "That is the curse of it. Failures can and do become apparent swiftly enough to damn my judgment. The successes are long-term ones, so long that they will be known only to my grandsons' grandsons."

"It is frustrating," agreed Edham. "What a pity that we have never achieved that time-travel which Kalteniel is so fond of depicting in his visiscrolls. You could then go forward many centuries and see precisely where you have done well, where you have erred."

"Kalteniel irks me now and again." Jolin shook his head in mild condemnation. "Take his supposedly more plausible stories of space-travel. He dumps people here, dumps them there, keeps them alive in spite of every adverse circumstance, makes them perform all sorts of antics as if the fundamental problem of existence were no problem at all. Life isn't so resilient. It's precarious. It is balanced by margins incredibly fine. If it were otherwise you and I would have different jobs."

Edham offered no comment.

"We are life-forms delicately held within ten million tiny and elusive circumstances," Jolin went on. "One small item, one seemingly insignificant feature, can create the bias that kills. On one otherwise innocent world it is the existence in its atmosphere of an exceedingly minute trace of gas with accumulative properties.

"On another it is an unsuspected undetected virus in the water." He glanced at the other. "A few Di-born plants grew erratically but clung to life on Theta Ten. Far more would not. They

lacked only a vague trace of copper in the earth."

"Who can measure the unknown?" said Edham.

"And the same is true in reverse." Jolin nodded toward the jungle. "In the Di-system some of those plants might flourish, others might contrive to exist by changing form to suit slightly different conditions—but many might wither and die for lack of one titanium atom in each ten thousand molecules of soil—or for lack of something else equally dispersed."

"I have been told all this," Edham reminded. "I do not fear the death of metabolic imbalance. By all accounts it comes insidiously, without pain." Cold-eyed, he studied the world beneath.

"But I do dislike the notion of involuntary change. Admittedly one survives when gradually altered by Nature to fit the new framework but one cannot be sure of the manner of one's change or the picture it presents in the end. There are so many possibilities, some of them repulsive."

"Yes," Jolin admitted it solemnly. "It is that I would find the most repugnant—alteration out of recognition. It is death which is not death. It is severance from one's own kind plus the torment of being something strange and new amid older unchanged life-forms that hate the strange and new. It is utter loneliness." He shuddered without shame. "I could not bear it."

"I could," said Edham, "if absolutely necessary." He paused, added in the same flat voice, "For a while."

Rafel changed the subject by appearing at the blister. "That is a fair sample down below. Most of the planet is the same. It spawns ferociously." He cupped his chin in his hand, regarded the tangle of life for awhile, then said, "We cannot sit down in any old place. We'll search the world and make a landing in the most attractive spot."

Edham said, "Or the least unattractive."

He did not smile when Rafel looked at him as if striving to discern what lay behind the mask. He was accustomed

to the long penetrating gaze of those large eyes. As always it was an attempted estimating—and none can weigh the soul. So he met Rafel's questing orbs with a tantalizing blankness that provided inward amusement for himself but did not irritate the other.

"Perhaps you are right," conceded Rafel. He shrugged and went away.

Presently the venturis lengthened their blasts to a multitude of fire-spears. The jungle leaves swayed and cowered while unseen forms beneath them sent up a cacophony of noise.

The ship soared a mile higher, moved forward. The clouds stabbed it with hot forks.

CHAPTER II

Sphere of Wrath

PARALLELING the equator on a route where the sub-tropics merged into the temperate zone, the Disian vessel traveled at sedate pace. There was no need for great speed, no urgency. Accurate observation of the land was the prime purpose and one cannot find earthly sanctuary at high velocity. So the ship roamed on, circumnavigating the world four times while its crew watched and waited for a haven of gentleness in this domain of savagery.

It was a sphere of wrath, hot, violent and seething with the sperm of a million things, great and small. Its clouds hung black and belly-bloated. Its trees climbed upon the bodies of their forebears as they fought hugely toward the blanketed sun.

Its animal forms were drinkers of blood, eaters of meat, feeders upon all other kinds, upon their own kind and upon their own young. They battled and copulated with an appalling frenzy, howling in labor, screaming in death and giving up their offal.

There was a horrid pseudo-life even beneath the earth. In certain places the surface crawled and rolled and heaved

while great fissures opened and steam burst forth. A river bent down into a hole and was spewed out boiling.

Topless mountains volleyed meteor-streams that curved through the clouds and fired the jungle. The quivering surface emitted tremendous groans and the river hissed deafeningly and the mountains cannonaded again and again and again.

The atmosphere was heavy, thick, moist and somehow enervating and invigorating at one and the same time. It was invisibly striated with smells—the odors of wood-rot, wet leaves, sulphur, steam, crushed funguses, burning bark, cooling lava, and decay.

To search all this for a resting place was to seek a lesser hell and that they found on the fourth time round. There was a raised valley between rounded hills with slow-moving yellow rivers flowing at either side. The valley was broad and large—the hills silent, without inward fires. No steam arose from vents in the solidly founded ground.

The trees, shrubs, vines and creepers were all present together with the hot-blooded things that hunted beneath them. The same smells came up, the same noises. But purely by contrast with other parts of the world the valley seemed a little more sheltered, a little more stable, a little less racked with the strains of competing life.

Lowering his vessel, Captain Rafel took it along the valley with assault-beams blazing at full intensity. Every living thing beneath promptly resolved itself to an ash so fine that much hung suspended while some slowly settled.

The trees and the tangles beneath the trees and the monsters who lurked in the tangles all became ash. From one end of the valley to the other, all ash. From hill-base to hill-base, nothing but thin unsolid stalks of ash quivering like new-born ghosts. The very ground was sterilized to a depth of twenty feet.

They ripped a cloud and rain came down and laid the reluctant dust. Over a smaller central area of the valley they beam-baked the mud so formed and converted it to the hard cake of an emer-

gency landing place. On this the ship sat, touching soil lightly, letting its weight be felt gradually and forming an earthy cup in which to rest.

The crew emerged, six hundred strong. They knew exactly what to do and needed no orders. It was a familiar task—they had planted a Granor many times before.

Dragging out their machines, the wall-builders began to cut huge stone blocks from the hills, to move them along and around the valley, to mount them one upon another and fuse them together. Heavily armed, the guarda squads patrolled beyond them near the burned rim of the jungle and kept hostile shapes at bay. Well inside the walls the prefab-erectors busied themselves assembling the sections of a small, compact house.

The biological party divided itself, extracted from the ship's cargo space a load of Disian seeds, tubers, cuttings, shoots and baby plants. These they unwrapped with loving care and proceeded to set in the alien earth according to a scheme conceived long in the past and executed time and time again in places spread across half creation's span.

Rafel hung around, watching. The wall arose and a raucous antagonism beyond the wall was quietened with a distant blast and the momentary shine of a beam. The house swung together, every addition making it more like a house. A quadruple row of tiny green growths already stretched from his feet to the base of the eastward wall. More plants, larger and darker, were being set beyond them.

"This performance, I presume, has the boredom of repetition," suggested Edham, joining him.

"Not at all. I look at today—but I see tomorrow." He glanced at the other, his eyes bright, luminous. "What do you see?"

EDHAM thought a moment, said, "I am given to visualize a few lines from that ancient saga called *The Granor of Theta Ten*. Doubtless they are familiar to you." He carried on and re-

cited them, speaking with a peculiar lack of emotion that somehow lent point to the words.

*"They labor'd without rest or cease
To make the land more fair,
And buidled him a place of peace
Five thousand cubits square."*

"The verse is appropriate," said Rafel. "It cannot be otherwise since the technique has remained the same."

"But not the tomorrows?"

"Not the tomorrows," Rafel admitted with some reluctance. "Nature will not have us everywhere."

"Nor have us exactly as we are."

"Sometimes." Rafel felt that he was being pushed where he had no desire to go. "And sometimes not." He counter-pushed with a proposal. "Come with me and explore beyond the walls."

"It is a useful idea," said Edham, betraying no hint of humor. "One should know one's neighbors."

Getting two pairs of scout-wings from the ship they struggled into the harness, each tightening the other's buckles. The wings swept white and gleaming from their shoulders as they switched on the tiny propulsors and soared. There was a certain trickiness in using this personal mode of flight, each user's pleasure being proportionate to his own dexterity.

Crossing the northward wall, already man-height and still growing, they floated wide-winged above the jungle's trees. Their closer approach made visible many things formerly hidden though others lurked lower and remained unseen. There were great worms in some tree-tops, sinuous, sliding, many-colored creatures that writhed up the trunks and lay along the branches and stared with beady unblinking eyes. There were other entities, barrel-bodied, beetle-browed, that swung from limb to limb and yelled at the winged forms above.

"A-a-ah! A-a-ah!"

And from faraway came the answering call of their fellows, red-eyed and toothy, "A-a-ah!"

At one point where a rocky outcrop

made a space of barrenness in the warring vegetation, there slumbered an eater too gigantic to be eaten. It was a slate-gray monstrosity, stupidly evil of face, massive of body, with a high serration running along it back. Its balloonlike belly shrank and filled as it breathed and its tail curved away through tree-gap after tree-gap. With tiny eyes closed it snored in a manner that shook the shrubs before its nose.

Rafel had swooped daringly close to get a better look at the slumberer and as he curved upward on wide-set wings, coming low over a tree, a many-hued worm stabbed half its length at him from where it lay concealed in the foliage.

So much swifter was his own reaction that he had time only to glimpse the soft elastic mouth and darting tongue before his beam sliced the thing in three. The parts fell near to the slate-gray sleeper and continued to jerk around with raw ends. The sleeper opened one eye, stared with dull disinterest at the squirming pieces, grunted deep down and closed the eye again.

"That," remarked Rafel, unruffled, "is another item for my collection of cosmic incongruities—a ambition in a worm."

Edham said, "Sometimes I wonder whether anyone else has us similarly rated."

"When we meet them—if ever we meet them—we shall not try to get them down our gullets," promised Rafel.

"What else shall we do?"

"We will allow them to swallow us." Rafel gave him a sly smile. "We have never found any difficulty in permitting the unavoidable."

"Neither shall I." He did not smile back. "In a way I shall have complete control of this world—I shall sit upon it and permit everything." Edham deftly tilted against a side-current, swung straight. "Let us view this river."

The westward waterway over which they skimmed was the broader of the two at either side of the valley. Slow-moving and sullen, its depths were yellow and full of life. Small shapes occa-

sionally leaped from its undersurface to escape larger pursuers and now and again the big ones jumped amid a shower of drops to avoid the monstrous. Logs floated downstream past other half-submerged things that strove to look like logs.

A black hook-beaked flyer fell from the clouds, coming silently on broad leathery surfaces, and plunged at Rafel while he was studying a log that had reptilian eyes. Edham sliced its head off in mid-air. The body shot straight to the water but did not touch it.

Great jaws came out of the river and caught it at the last moment, then sank from sight. A few lazy bubbles arose. The log which had drawn Rafel's attention split at one end and yawned, exposing many teeth.

"Here life is a phase—death an incident," Edham commented. "What a world!"

"To face alone," added Rafel.

Edham laughed without showing it.

CHAPTER III

Sanctuary

THE encampment was complete in every detail on the fortieth day. Its walls stood a hundred cubits high by ten cubits thick, solid, jointless, four-square, without a break except for one armor-plate door in the center of the side that faced south. The living house was finished and equipped.

The instrument shed stood near it, the tool shed adjoined it and the transparent house for incubating plants was right behind. Apart from that occupied by the space-ship, the rest of the area within the walls was a parade-ground for Disian plants in companies and battalions.

Rafel had a schematic diagram spread across a table inside the house and his long slender forefinger shifted from point to point as he spoke.

"As you know your main task will be

to keep check on all this. Every plant-section must be covered not less than once in five days. Every stage of growth must be carefully noted. Any departure from the norm must be recorded in the fullest possible detail. Any failure to develop must likewise be entered.

"Take especial note of comparative rates of progress for they are important. If the hard-fruited trees do well while the soft-fruited bushes do not, we want to know in what way they differ, item by item, for such information is invaluable."

"I have had all this at the training college," Edham remarked. "We may never know why some Di-plants flourish in alien conditions while others do not but it is sufficient to learn which can survive."

"Exactly," agreed Rafel. "Where enough of them cling to existence, so can we. It is essential to know in advance how many can live and of what kinds. That is real knowledge." He mused a little while over the graph. "I find it galling that we are reduced to animal status by one dismal fact—that any world can resist our settlement by resisting our digestive juices."

"Kalteniel has the problem solved. His characters are never guilty of any animal function. Would that I were one of them."

"That brings me to the most emphatic point." Rafel's great eyes looked straight and steadily into his. "This also is something you've had before, had it until you're sick of it, but before I go it must be said again. That is the strictest rule of Granor-planting—the Granor must not be left without being told again. Until such time as we return you will subsist solely upon foods of Di-origin."

"I know, I know."

"The stores we leave will last far beyond your fifth harvest—if there are any harvests. You are free to eke out your preserved supplies with fresh stuff grown within these walls—if any does grow." His voice grew sharp, authoritative. "But of the foods native to this

world you must not eat!"

His long schooling at the College of Granors made itself felt as Edham squared his shoulders and obediently echoed, "Of native fruits I must not eat."

"Remember that—always remember," Rafel emphasized, "The food natural to this earth may be quite innocuous. Possibly you might wax fat upon it, more so than upon Di-foods. If so we are lucky indeed. But the time for testing the matter is not yet."

"Be satisfied that already you are breathing alien air of unknown potentialities, that you are continually subjected to the rays of an alien sun with hidden powers, that you remain within alien gravitational and magnetic fields—and the total long-term effects of all these are pure guesswork until such time as you have eliminated the guesses."

"So do not be venturesome or impatient. Remember that enough is enough and rest content with the hazards already imposed upon you."

"Do you suspect me of excessive zeal?" asked Edham.

"I have no suspicions—but I do have memories."

"Of what?"

"Of many things." He hesitated, went on, "My mind holds vivid pictures I would give much to forget. For example I see the Granor of the unnamed world near Arka. He suffered unanticipated disaster to his stores, became hungry and thirsty long before our return. And when we came back—"

"Go on," urged Edham.

"I remember his lonely distorted shape crawling into the dark as our ship lifted and cut him off forever from his kind. What he had was terrible, incurable and contagious. So he crept humbly into the dark and waited for the deeper darkness of the end. His name is upon the obelisk."

"Where mine will never be," capped Edham, "I shall live and grow fat out of sheer spite."

Rafel said severely, "There is nothing funny about it. There is nothing funny."

"I am not jesting. I am trying only to reassure you."

At that moment Jolin came along to bid farewell and Rafel said to him, "He is attempting to comfort me."

"It would be more logical if I were the subject of his solicitude," returned Jolin morbidly. "The weight upon his spirit is equaled by the weight upon my mind."

"Did you choose that unnamed world near Arka?" Edham asked him.

"No, thank the broad heavens! That one was not my mistake."

"Neither will this one be."

"Now he's comforting you." Rafel spread his hands to indicate helplessness. "What can one do with a person who insists on giving what he is supposed to receive?"

Gazing at the sky Edham suggested, "Leave him to his fearsome task of lazing around and permitting the unavoidable."

Jolin swallowed, said uneasily, "It's not going to be quite that." Then he changed his mind, hurriedly finished. "Farewell!" He shook hands and went, his features worried.

"He's somewhat sensitive for a planetary surveyor," opined Edham, gazing after him.

"He has seen too much," Rafel corrected. "As I have done." He too shook hands, returned to the ship, paused in its open lock to wag a warning finger and utter a final, "Remember!"

The lock closed. Edham backed well away from the venturis. Presently the tubes spouted fire and dust flew around and a great wave of warmth went through the walled area. Voices beyond the walls set up a chorus of hoots and screams.

Slowly the vessel rose, teetering and repeatedly correcting its plane until it had gained stabilizing speed. The lone watcher stood there while it was reduced to a tiny shining circle entering a cloud. It vanished into a black belly. He sighed and sat upon a handy rock.

"I am the Granor of the Green World, a seed of Di planted to discover just what happens to me. I am the lowliest tool of a super-agronomy, the test-piece, the fleshly nurseling among a million

vegetable ones. If I live here my kind will live here. If I change my kind will change. If I die my kind will die. For better or for worse I am the Granor of the Green World."

Beyond the walls, "A-a-ah! A-a-ah!"

OF course the first night was the worst. The felon caged for life can hear and sometimes see evidence of the workaday world outside. The shipwrecked survivor upon a deserted island can scan the horizon hopefully, week by week, tempor by tempor. But one with an entire planet to himself knows an isolation that cannot be more complete. The Granor is alone, utterly alone.

He lay on his air-cushioned bunk within the prefabricated house while the world's gloom thickened toward midnight and sleep refused to come. His mind insisted upon busying itself with calculations of tempors and velocities which would enable it to place the approximate position of the departing vessel.

His eyes kept opening to stare at the pearls of condensation shining on the ceiling. He could have cleared these away at one turn of a handy switch but he had not noticed them because he was looking at an imaginary space-ship. All the time his ears were straining to catch outside noises, of which there were plenty.

There had been a peculiar hush when the hidden sun went down and twilight came and coldness flowed in. The daytime noises had subsided—the night howlers had been slow to appear. Now, as the earth turned farther around from the warmth, the hairy things that shout, "A-a-ah!" were silent and other creatures with different voices built up their own characteristic din.

For almost a quarter tempor two of them—huge and invisible—fought with shrill screams and much flapping of batwings right over his roof. In the end one landed upon the roof, gasped and bubbled awhile, made many scratching scrabbling sounds before it took off and vanished into the dark. It left an acrid smell as of strange blood.

Eastward, just outside the wall, a pair of unknown shapes of unknown tonnage battled tremendously, emitting piercing whistles at intervals and causing the faintest of tremors in the ground. Edham pressed a hand on the floor to sense the quivers, slight but discernible.

To cap the rest the wind built itself up to a loud moan that sounded as if the world itself were registering its agony. Distant trees thrashed and great limbs broke loose and tattered objects flew through the air.

The moan went up a hundred cycles where the airstream hit the wall, dropped lower as it sped across the planted area. Clouds rushed close-packed across the sky, seeming to be held in space while the earth rotated independently.

As the tempors crept nearer to morning Edham dozed without really sleeping. He had fragmentary dreams of the great city of Dise upon the planet also called Dise beneath the sun name Di. At no time had he scorned the city, yet he had failed to enjoy it as others had enjoyed it.

Now he wanted it. They had warned him at the college that it is natural to desire lost things when it is too late. He must conquer the yearning—but he wanted the city.

Dawn found him heavy-eyed and restless. The hurricane had gone, the heat-meter's hand already had begun to move along its scale and the same bellowers were back with their sounds. Taking the top package from the nearest pile in his ground-level stockroom he opened it, ate a four-course breakfast.

The torn wrappings lay across his knees while he ate and he could see the lettering—*Sunup Meal 1*. The sight did not please him despite his long training. This irritation was no more than evidence of an incongruity which for centuries had bedeviled the worthy tutors at the College of Granors, namely, that trainees are selected as natural pioneers—and men who are natural pioneers do not take kindly to regimentation.

Thus he scowled at the lettering be-

cause he knew that when the correct tempor chimed he would open *Noon Meal 1* and later *Sundown Meal 1* and tomorrow *Sunup Meal 2*.

He was being fed prepared fodder at prescribed times exactly like an exhibit in the zoo.

Finishing, he got mild satisfaction out of burning the wrappings with their offending inscription. He went out to inspect the Di-nursery, hoping for work. Already there was a little for him to do. Limbs and pieces of bark and strips of frond and thousands of leaves ripped from outer trees lay scattered all over the place.

Patiently he gathered this rubbish into the bare circle where the ship had squatted and beamed it to ash. That filled in his morning and after the noon meal he spent a couple of tempors tending plants that had suffered slight damage overnight.

A short time before sunset he got out his wings, had an awkward job with the harness, which was not easy to fit single-handed. The tiny propulsor drove him to the top of the wall, where he strolled along its broad flat crest with pinions folded and gleaming.

The toothy ones in the jungle snarled and gibbered in anger at the unearthly sight.

At a point near the corner where the wall right-angled northward a local object waddled out of its hiding place, came right to the base of the impassable rampart and stood directly below him. Staring upward with red eyes that burned beneath projecting brows, it drummed resoundingly upon its chest, made deep grunting sounds and drooled saliva.

Its attitude was challenging, an unmistakable invitation to come down and settle once for all the question of who was the superior life-form. Edham answered it by pausing in his walk, giving glare for glare and laughing inside of himself until the creature foamed with fury.

At the height of its rage he calmly spread his wings, glided within the walls and out of its sight.

CHAPTER IV

Lonely Vigil

THERE was little sleep that night either. He made a fitting end to an imperfect day by consuming *Sundown Meal 1*, recited his brief notes into his autorecorder, had a short time with a pictorialized story taken from his small library, then composed himself upon his bunk.

Soon the rain came. It sounded as if someone high above were throwing away an unwanted ocean. He had never heard anything like it. The skies thundered and the ground thundered and the jungle bent over. There was alarm in his mind comparable to the noise in his ears for he had visions of tender sucklings being bombarded out of existence.

Kalteniel would have countered this menace by shielding the whole area under a force-screen. A Granor has no such means available since he must rely upon what exists in reality rather than in the imagination.

Disian science had produced effective power-beams, which could perform work or be concentrated destructively, but there was no known way in which to spread a beam without loss of power to the point of impotence. In grim fact there was nothing to discipline the torrent but the pumps.

His restlessness soon turned to action. Getting a transparent waterproof sheath from a nearby hook he pulled it over himself like an upended sack, went out with his powerful handlight shining through the protecting material. The rain battered at him furiously and ran over the sheath in such a heavy stream that it blurred his vision.

Despite this he made his way to the instrument shed wherein were his power-plant and the pumps which were connected with the area's irrigation system. The squat heavy atomic engine needed no starting for it was built to run continuously until due for replace-

ment in several years' time. He put the six pumps into operation one by one, letting the engine take up the load in stages.

Very soon their joint output meter registered eight aquabulks per millitempor, an accurate indication of the great quantity pouring from the clouds. He remained in the shed for part of the night, nursing the pumps, watching the meters and listening to the downpour.

When eventually outside sounds were replaced by an amazing calm and the output meter showed a drop, he stopped the pumps, returned to the house, voiced a complaint into his autorecorder before laying down on his bunk.

"I can switch from the house everything switchable excepting the pumps. This world being what it is, remote control of those would be a convenience."

That was telling them. At some future time on some similar planet a Granor would be able to cope with a flood at the touch of a hand. They might even arrange it for *him* the trip after next—if he were still living at that time. If he were still . . . Slumber stepped in and drove the speculation from his mind.

He reposed flat on his back with eyes closed, his lungs sucking heavily at the alien air. Beyond the wall all was silent save for the patter of dislodged drops and the ripple of dying rivulets.

Three weeks of backbreaking toil were needed to make good the damage. There is no Disian automaton capable of reviving and resetting ter thousand infant plants which have been tormented almost to death. Each one had to be treated tenderly and by hand, its weak roots bedded firmly in the earth, its leaves fondled to erectness.

He finished with sore fingers and a crick in the spine. Had all the growths suffered he could not have coped in time to save them. But the bulbs and tubers had squatted hidden and undisturbed while the baby trees had survived the overnight ordeal.

Only the smallest, most delicate surface plants had been washed out and the major part of these he had been able to

restore. Perhaps ten percent were beyond rescue. At least there had been no further disaster while the job was in hand.

The midday task was complete he bathed, gave his aching back some radiant heat treatment, consumed *Noon Meal 22*, dictated his notes to the autorecorder.

"Sectors ten to eighteen have been reset. The loss numbers about one in ten. All other sectors remain rooted. The six end rows in sector nine are turning from green to yellow and their leaves show first signs of shriveling.

"The whole of the trees in twenty-four to forty are advancing at above normal rate, appear healthy and vigorous and seem likely to grow much larger than their usual size. There is nothing to report about remaining sectors."

GAZING absently at the mouthpiece into which he had spoken, he thought awhile, added, "I have examined myself in the mirror and see nothing unusual except that I look physically tired. To date my sleep has been inadequate. My weight has gone down by one twentieth. Doubtless these things will correct themselves in due course."

The listening machine got no more than that, the bare facts. At the college his brevity often had been deplored. They liked garrulous Granors who filled in the picture with a wealth of detail. It did not matter that the babblers were compounding with an unnatural situation by talking to themselves, using spool after spool of recording tape for the pleasure of hearing their own voices.

According to the tutors, much information of great value had been sorted out from such seemingly inconsequential chatter. Edham did not feel that he had yet got to the self-conversational stage or that he would ever get to it. So far as he was concerned, when the time came to pray for a voice it must be another's voice, different, new.

A full day of lounging in the library, watching selections from pictorialized books, served to refresh him and take away the aches. The Disian breed re-

oovers swiftly, is resilient. That is to say, the fleshy *Disia*s.

The vegetable ones varied for no known reason. Thus the yellowing plants in sector nine turned yellower and slowly released their frail hold on life while the burgeoning *bodhi* trees in twenty-four to forty continued to progress at rates almost detectable between successive sundowns.

He took samples of the dying ones, dissecting them, subjecting thin slivers of cross-section to microscopic inspection, analysing the roots and the dirt in which they had been buried. The apparatus in the instrument shed was good enough for rough one-man estimates but not sufficiently delicate to detect and measure the merest traces of rare elements.

Either the cause of the casualties was something too minute and elusive to identify with what he had available—or more probably it was beyond identification in the light of present-day knowledge. It might well be seated in improperly understood plant-psychology, the mysterious reasons why one growth made itself at home while another died rather than endure the strangeness.

What little he did discover went into the notes. Characteristically all hazard and speculation were left out. The bare facts as usual. On the day the last member of the six rows was definitely dead and all the growths in sector twelve began to show first signs of surrendering the battle, he recorded the matter impassively.

"The little ones in the westward rows of sector nine have gone without exception. The bushes in twelve are now sickening. The rest exist, some vigorously, some not, as per yesterday's report."

Two months later, after he had beamed to dust the faded remnants of sector twelve, he sickened himself. The temperature of his blood arose, he perspired profusely, felt weak and muddled-minded. His digestive system went haywire.

Frequent doses of the likeliest drugs had no effect. The disease put him on

his back, too exhausted to weed the acres or carry out inspections, make notes or do anything else than let it run its course—to recovery or the end.

Between spells of delirium he listened for outer disaster, wondering whether—if necessity proved dire enough—he could lift and thumb his attack-beam or crawl to the pumps. Experimentally he made two attempts to begin the crawl, failed both times.

He was many five-day reports overdue when eventually the illness relaxed its hold. The rain had come almost every night and sometimes by day but never in a menacing torrent. The plants still stood undisturbed. He was alive though thin and lacking in strength. There was much for which to be thankful.

The autorecorder got a curt uncomplaining description of his sickness, its symptoms, its progress. He did not bother to emphasize that he was breathing alien air, drinking distilled alien water but eating *Disian* food, that therefore the food was not to blame.

Let the machine's future listeners draw their own conclusions—that was their job. His was to be the subject of the operation and tell how it felt, stage by stage, even though the knife sank deep. The Granor is a seed of his race. It is helpful to plant a seed that can talk, even though laconically.

IN the third year, when the *bodhi* trees fruited tremendously and became smothered with their typical golden balls of succulence, the *akhodhi* trees produced a lesser load of distorted discolored objects that were repulsively sour to the taste.

The two kinds were related, different varieties of the same species, yet one had spawned and the other miscarried. One had mastered circumstances, the other been mastered by them—almost like people.

Edham got a thought out of that, a dark suspicion. He did not record it because it was not yet a self-evident fact. But the notion kept circling tentatively in his mind, without hardening. It gained strength nearer the year's end

when ten allied breeds of bushes produced crops as eatable as any on their home territory—but at different dates, in different sizes, shapes and colors.

All tasted the same. All gave the same responses to his perhaps inadequate analysis. All provided a welcome freshness for his digestive juices and nourished him to the same extent. Yet all were different.

"If I live my kind can live. If I live my kind will settle here, build new cities, a new world. They will have natural increase—but will that increase be natural? Will their children be the same?"

No answer—no way of telling. It was entirely his own mystery, as unsatisfactory and frustrating as Jolin's sad puzzle. So he held it in restraint without putting it aside, and gladly ate of such of the crop as was eatable. He had consumed *Sunup Meal 1100* already and was more than eager for a change of diet.

"I am now going out of count with the packaged food," he recorded, "by reason of using part of the crop. There are yet no signs of anything seeding apart from the usual influx of local weeds. The crop has to be protected not only from these but also from periodic attacks of flying things, occurring always during daylight tempors, never at night.

"So far I have killed about four hundred raiders and lost little. There has been nothing to show why night-time flyers are not similarly attracted. I have examined myself and have been unable to detect any change except that my color remains heightened."

Propagation eventually followed the same course as the fruiting, delays where there had been delays, intervals matching intervals, differences where there had been differences. Something in the rays of the concealed sun or the soil or the rain or the air was creating new varieties and thrusting a subtle wedge between existing ones to force them further apart.

Nevertheless he noted every item, patiently set the seed, drove off the winged

monsters whose bellies yearned for the grains as much as for the fruits. Aware by training that what he had eaten of this his first crop, though of Di-origin, was alien grown, he watched himself more frequently for secondary effects. There were none visible and when one did come it caught him unknowing, unsuspecting.

He was winged for one of his boredom-breaking strolls around the wall and a pleasant exchange of insults with his neighbors when a black thing came down from the sky, intent on plunder. Many a seed was being coddled by the ash of such a visitor but this time he did not wait for it to land before dissolving it in smoke.

A sudden unfamiliar feeling swept irresistibly over him. His veins swelled, his eyes blazed, he spread his wings and bulleted upward to meet it. The creature died halfway down from a cloud and as he beamed it he heard a yell of triumph in his own voice.

Sitting on top of the wall, pinions folded, the midjoints pointing high above his shoulders, legs dangling down on the jungle side, he pondered the phenomenon. It was unwonted bellicosity. That any Disian can display belligerence was not in itself surprising. No kind can settle a thousands worlds without taking the offensive whenever the occasion demanded it. The point was that he had displayed uncontrolled animosity at the drop of a meal wrapper without real need to do so. It was lack of self-discipline. It was unreason.

The subject stewed in his mind a full tempor, during which he gave grave consideration to the possible state of his liver, his gall bladder, his kidneys or, alternatively, the subtler effect upon his mentality of three years of isolation.

Before he had finished his speculations the chest-drummer or its twin brother shambled out of the jungle shadows, stood directly below him, glared up red-eyed and roared its hate. On other days when this had happened he'd contented himself with an answering mock-glare guaranteed to make the creature put over an interesting exhi-

bition of animal frenzy. This time his own eyes blazed. He bent forward—and spat upon it.

CHAPTER V

The Sound of a Voice

FOR a considerable time afterwards he was broody, introspective, frequently consulted the mirror. There was no physical change that he could pin down as more than imaginary. The hair on his head seemed thicker, more wiry, harder to subdue. His eyes held a constant hint of aggressiveness—or so he fancied. He could not be sure.

Sheer self-discipline kept him away from the walls while he concentrated upon the plants, his progress reports and the potentially alterable phenomenon of his own body. On four occasions he bit his lips as he beamed a flying raider, coolly, carefully, with determined disregard of that part of him which screamed for closer battle.

Nothing of this went into the auto-recorder, not a jot, not a hint. All the transformations he could perceive were duly noted but not those only half-seen or dimly suspected.

With the end of winter and the coming of spring the rising tide of his blood swamped his restraint. Day after day, tempor after tempor, he had paced his enclosure from one end to the other, to and fro, to and fro, like a caged animal. The skies retained their everlasting gray but the fresher air was cool and warm by turns. Putting on his wings he soared to the wall, strolled along its crest.

A slate-colored colossus, resembling that monstrous sleeper of long ago, was standing close to the base on the southern side and rubbing its back against the stone to scrape off unseeable parasites. The process created loud rasping sounds and sent up an odor of pungent hide.

Standing directly above it and looking

down into the smell, Edham felt his mouth open of its own accord and he bawled an ugly name at it. The monster ceased its scratching, looked stupidly around in every direction but upward. He called it again. It discovered him, focused eyes incongruously small in so tremendous a head.

Releasing an angry snort of such power that he could feel the wind of it many cubits above, the thing reared itself against the wall, tried to claw him down, found him out of reach by more than a man-length. It gave another snort of imbecilic disappointment, fell back to ground with a rousing thud. Its stench was strong, acrid.

For the first time since his almost forgotten trip with Rafel the winged Edham left the enclosure. With no thought of rules and regulations and temporarily forgetful of past training he spread his pinions and dived off the wall—outward. His bold swoop carried him straight across the other's serrated back, his feet touching it in passing. It twisted with twenty-ton clumsiness, clawed at him and missed. Behemoth swiping a wasp.

Edham landed lightly in thick grass. His opponent snuffed eagerly and charged. He soared again at the very last instant, his eyes afire. The thing tossed its head as its own momentum carried it beneath him, touched a foot. He beamed away the tip of its tail as it passed. The jungle was full of spectators, howling and hooting at the pair of them. The tree-tops quivered and gave forth noises.

Coming down into the grass once more he whirled around in readiness for another charge. His lungs were big, his breath came fast and some strange appetite within him was satiating itself upon he knew not what.

The slate-gray nightmare had lumbered around in a small circle, snuffing all the while. Finding him, it fixed tiny eyes upon him, expanded its nostrils to keep his scent and launched itself forward. The ponderous beat of its oncoming feet resounded far through the ground and vibrated up the trees to

where the hidden audience stank and gibbered.

With wings folded Edham waited for the creature to be almost upon him. He remained stock still until he could see the wetness upon a huge misshapen tooth. Then he sprang aside. Too much tonnage carried the other on, unable to swerve. He rayed away another section of its tail.

By now the peculiar hunger within him had gone. He opened wings to soar, found himself anchored. A weirdly patterned worm in the undergrowth had coiled itself around one ankle. It had beady unblinking eyes that watched him fixedly as coil after coil came slithering through the grass.

The slate-gray monster came back thunderously, cheered on by the crowd. Edham chopped the worm at random, arose sluggishly with the severed portion still clinging as if unconscious of its loss. The slate-gray monster was almost upon him.

For an awful moment he thought he was not going to make it. Power poured through the propulsor and his wings swept wide while the beady-eyed thing clung raw-ended and tried to summon its missing length.

Dragging it with him he went up, frantically shaking his leg. It dropped off barely in time to save him and sudden release of the burden caused him to shoot skyward almost from under the twenty-tonner's nose.

THIS close escape eased the peculiar gnawing inside him. Gaining the wall he sat on its top, drew long relieved breaths and perspired. There were queer disconnected thoughts running through his mind, the inconsequential notions of an uneasy sleep.

"Life is beautiful because of death, like light in the darkness. To battle is to live and to live is to be not-dead. I must fight or be dead. I must live. A Granor must live."

He looked down upon his recent opponent, now snorting around defeatedly, and echoed in bemused manner, "A Granor? What is a Granor?"

Then he stood up and yelled at the jungle, "I am Man! Look, I am Man!"

The jungle screamed back, "A-a-ah!"

The ship's return was like the occurrence of a major miracle. True, after most of six years it should have been expected or at least hoped for. But six years can be six tempors or as many centuries, according to the circumstances. By the time it came back it was to Edham little more than the figment of a half-forgotten dream.

He stiffened with incredulity when the clouds were blown apart and the vessel appeared. A multitude of emotions electrified his being while he watched the shining thing come down. A conflicting mixture of surly resentment and ecstatic anticipation took hold of him as though somehow he had become two individuals in one body, each reacting in its own way. The vision of the ship had precipitated a sort of spiritual schizophrenia.

Rafel was first out. His big luminous eyes alive with pleasure he seized Edham's hand, winced at the power of its grasp.

"Here we are, not merely up to time, but early." His hands went to either side of the other's shoulders, patting them, estimating their width. "My, but you look splendid! You're bigger, broader, heavier and it's all muscle. This place must suit you. Jolin will be overjoyed."

"Jolin," murmured Edham, looking around.

"He's not with us this trip," Rafel went on. "No point in him judging the same planet twice. He has gone with Razudiel to look over a new system beyond Neo-Dise."

"So?" said Edham, staring at the ship.

"Well, aren't you pleased to see us?" Rafel regarded him more carefully. "You never did say much but now you seem almost speechless." His smile followed quickly, full of sympathy. "I guess you're a little overwhelmed by company and the sound of a voice."

"The sound of a voice," repeated Edham, speaking as if from far away.

Taking his arm, Rafel led him toward

the ship. "The first part of your task—the stage of silence—is ended. The worst is over. The next will be shorter and sweeter—if the medicos pass you."

"If," said Edham.

"There seems little likelihood that they won't," encouraged Rafael. "I have never seen a Granor looking in such excellent trim."

"I am not fattening myself for the kill," Edham assured. "And what is more I am laughing." He nodded toward the wall. "As I have laughed at them, loud, long and often." He paused, licked his lips, added with strange satisfaction, "They do not like me laughing."

Sobering, Rafael became thoughtful as he took Edham into the ship, handed him over to the medicos.

There were six of these examiners, tall, coldly professional, white-coated. Stripping him they went over him cell by cell, made him breathe down a tube so that the contents of his lungs bubbled into an inverted bottle, took blood samples from various parts of him, took hair and nail clippings, even a skin section.

They rayed him, studied his insides upon a fluorescent screen from four different angles, discussed his spleen in incomprehensible jargon. They photographed the lining of his stomach with a button camera at the end of a flexible tube, used a powerful light beam and a magnaglass to examine his tongue, throat and epiglottis. They asked a hundred questions.

"You have a seed molar. Did the first one expel itself in normal manner or did you have to extract it?"

"When did you first observe the appearance of body-hair?"

"Did you make a note of it in your autorecorder?"

"Did it appear simultaneously in all places where now evident, or did it start in one place and spread from there?"

HE asked, "Does hair matter?"

"Most certainly."

"Why?"

They became evasive. "Hair upon the body is not a normal feature of our

kind—and every change matters."

"So I have changed?"

The chief examiner said, "Look, everyone alters from birth to death."

"As I have?"

"This is a routine investigation and not a debate," reminded the examiner. "Leave it to us to decide which physical phenomena are significant and which are not."

Edham said, "Don't bellow at me."

"I am not bellowing. I spoke in perfectly ordinary tones." He gestured to an assistant. "Have a look at his ears."

They went over the ears, presently put down upon a form the words, *Aural sense preternaturally sharpened.*

A bit later, "How did you acquire those scars on the calf-muscle of your right leg?"

He stared down at the leg, twisting himself to see the marks. "Fighting a wild thing. It clawed me."

They were tempted to ask why he had not beamed it before it got that near but refrained. Such questions were for the psychoanalysts.

In due time the latter had their turn and put it to him, "Is your hand-projector still energized and efficient?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you use it?"

"I please myself. I am an individual."

"We have not the slightest desire to challenge your rights as such," soothed the other. "We are merely interested in your reasons for doing whatever you saw fit to do. We cannot and would not force you to give an explanation."

"You'd have a hot time trying," assured Edham, involuntarily tightening his fist.

The expert was very observant. Calmly he regarded the fist, estimated the degree of muscular contraction, the amount of mental tension behind it. Edham forced the hand to open, the fingers to relax. The other was not deceived.

"Have you been beyond the walls?"

"Yes."

"Have you actually landed outside the walls?"

"Yes."

"Often?"

"Yes."

"Knowing that it was contrary to instructions?"

"Yes."

"And dangerous?"

Edham said nothing.

The expert wrote down a couple of little squiggles meaning, *Co-operative with reluctance—but truthful*, before he went off on another tack.

"Members of the crew are checking over the state of the plantation and condition of the ramparts. Beyond the wall they have found a bloodthirsty looking creature, thick-furred, with striped markings. It is dead. It appears to have expired recently, in mid-spring, claws extended, mouth open."

He stared at Edham, who remained silent. He placed an object on his desk. "It was pierced by four of those."

The object was a long slender arrow. "It is well-made," commented the expert. "Skillfully constructed with a needle-sharp metal head. The bow from which it came must have been powerful."

"It was," Edham acknowledged indifferently.

"Did you shoot this creature from the wall-top or were you in the outside grass?"

"The grass."

"A bow, a bow and arrows," commented the other, poking the pointed and feathered shaft away from him. "He uses a primitive type of weapon in lieu of a modern beam-projector." His gaze lifted, he surveyed Edham curiously. "It would be nice to learn the logic on which such a preference is based."

Edham said, "The targets are just as primitive. They struggle with what they've got, what they can make themselves."

"I see." The leading questioner glanced at his silently listening fellows, returned his attention to Edham. "You cannot manufacture a projector which needs all the craft of an experienced armorer—but you can make a bow. You derive satisfaction from that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Both his fists hardened and whitened as Edham leaned forward and snapped, "I am Man!"

"That will be all," said the other.

CHAPTER VI

The Redhead

EDHAM never saw the reports. Written conclusions invariably are withheld from the Granor. His only clue lay in the length of the deliberations and the frequent summoning of Rafael, who looked a mite more solemn at each successive visit. It was evident that there was some difference of opinion, some profound uncertainty which made the question of triumph or failure highly debatable.

Eventually he would know their decision from what they did with him. If he had changed in manner not to their liking but had nothing contagious, they would put a black mark against the planet and take him home.

If he were afflicted with something unwanted, incurable and uncontrollable, they would abandon him along with his accursed world and add his name to those upon the obelisk. But if failure were not yet certain and success a possibility, no matter how remote, they would push him into the second stage of his task.

It was four days before he knew. In that time the crew had attended to all repairs, overhauled the engine and pumps, installed a remote control for the latter, supplied fresh spools for his autorecorder, recharged his beam, supplied new wings and propulsion, landed a huge load of packaged meals, all duly numbered. They did not touch the plants. The living would go on living—the dead stay dead.

There were eight females with the crew. Moving around together in a lithe colorful bunch, they explored the house, the instrument shed, the plantation. In

single file they trotted along the wall-top, chattering like birds, laughing in lilting tones and exclaiming from time to time over the few exotic flowers visible in the jungle.

All were young, strong, well-shaped. All studied Edham with clear frank eyes at every opportunity, weighing him up, estimating him. For his part he tried to avoid them. Their presence was closely linked with his fate. He was acutely conscious of the fact and embarrassed by the uncertainty of his position.

In the late afternoon of the fourth day Rafel came to him. "The conference is over. I am more than glad to hear the end of it. Yours has been a difficult case."

"I know. I am hairy."

Rafel did not smile. He went on, "They say you have changed and in all probability will continue to do so. The purely physical features of it are innocuous. They are nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. Indeed, some of them are advantageous."

"Come to the worst," Edham suggested impatiently.

"It is the psychological shift that has them bothered. They detect an abnormal combativeness which, in theory, could grow until it becomes completely irrational."

"This life of mine is abnormal. What do they expect? The dullness of a routine worker in Dise?"

"All your troubles and trials have been taken into account," said Rafel. "After considering everything—even the impetuosity of the pioneer, even boredom—they find more bellicosity than can be explained, more than is natural or necessary. It is the little extra you have absorbed from this bellicose world. You may continue to absorb it. At saturation point—if you live to reach it—where will you be?"

"Sitting around and not permitting everything," Edham answered. "And laughing."

Letting it pass Rafel continued, "Anyway, the second stage of this planet-probing task is shorter, less trying. You should come to no great harm if we

carry on awhile. Besides we would deserve to lose a world if we let go of it at the first setback." He looked straight at Edham. "Do you want to be taken home while the going is still good?"

Edham said in level tones, "To return voluntarily would be to return in disgrace, to be pointed out as the Granor who came back screaming. Do you think I would enjoy that? How would you like a bust on the nose?"

"There you go again," said Rafel shrugging good-humoredly. "Well, the die is cast. It is for you to go through the second stage."

"With whom?"

"Of the eight Companions who have seen you and looked over this place, six have volunteered."

"Two don't like me, eh?"

"Not necessarily," denied Rafel. "For some reason which is beyond my mere male mind there are always two who want to see the next place. No matter how many Companions I take out, invariably I return with two—eagerly awaiting yet another world."

"Feminine curiosity," ventured Edham.

"The six have taken first pick as is the right of their sex. It is now your turn."

"Which six?"

Rafel nodded toward somewhere behind the other's back. "They are over there. The pair of transgalactic tourists are in the ship."

Without looking around Edham said, "If the tall, slender one with the flaming hair is among them—"

"The redhead. So be it. You have chosen your Companion as she has chosen you." Rafel eyed the sky. "I will perform the ceremony of association this evening if you are agreeable. We will depart at the fourth tempor of tomorrow."

WITH the morning they were summoned to the vessel, the Granor and his Companion.

Rafel began with, "We are ready to boost. Is there anything you desire, anything you wish to ask before we go?"

"No," replied Edham.

"Are you satisfied with each other?" He smiled as he read the answer in their faces. "We shall return in about three and a half years. I hope then to find evidence in favor of systematic settlement.

"If so, a time may come when more Disians share your world, building it to greatness." His gaze shifted from one face to the other. "You will have much honor."

"Darn the honor," said Edham. "Give me the fun."

Trying to frown his disapproval, Rafael found it far from easy. He switched the subject. "Any alterations in yourselves will be the results of or adjustment to local conditions. Comparatively speaking it will be slow, insidious. It cannot have the swiftness and extremism of radical mutation." He stopped, rubbed his forehead while he sought around for further words.

"Meaning our children?" Edham prompted.

Rafel seized upon it gratefully. "We could learn more of real significance from your children than we can ever learn from you. Apart from other yet undetected peculiarities this planet has a deal of radioactivity. What does it mean to our kind? What might it do?" He spread helpless hands. "We don't know."

"All in good time," offered Edham.

"Your children are very much to be desired—by us," Rafael went on. "Nevertheless I advise you not to have any unless desired by you."

The redhead put in tartly, "The Ancient College of Granors' Companions is not a consortium for the stupid and—"

Hurriedly, Rafael countered her. "I am reminding you that Dise imposes no duty upon you in this particular respect. You are completely free to please yourselves."

"That goes for me, too," she said, blandly shoving him off balance.

Recovering he stood up, made his voice serious. "Except in one respect—you will eat nothing native to this

world. It is strictly forbidden. When the time comes to try subsisting on local products, you will be informed."

"Boxed-up meals." She sighed regretfully. "Enriched, concentrated, reduced, fastened down and caged. I took a tedious course on them—*How to Make Packaged Food Interesting*. Oh, well." She patted her flaming hair, tucked a curl behind her ear. "There are other interests."

Eyeballing her somewhat askance Rafael avoided the subject, held out his hand.

The two stood side by side watching the ship go up. It shrank as before, was swallowed up by a cloud, was gone.

"And that is that," remarked Edham, sensing the loss and yet glad of it.

"What now, Flabby?" she inquired.

"I think that for a start—" His voice petered out, his eyes suddenly burned at her. "What was that you just called me?"

She repeated it with annoying gusto, a smile on her oval face, and she turned slightly sidewise. A growl sounded low in his chest. He pounced at her, hands out, fingers wide. She was away like the wind, hair streaming.

It was a full and arduous tempo before he cornered her by the southern wall. The laughter of their struggle brought answering howls and screams from the other side of the ramparts.

MORE imaginative treatment of meals plus the comfort of her presence transformed the area into a haven of peace and satisfaction—for a time. Edham lazed around, ignored the jungle, enjoyed his new-found domesticity.

The girl had a seemingly endless capacity for keeping him amused, occupying his attention, diverting his energies from former paths. When his spell of idleness wore off she found him numerous tasks and when she came to the end of those she invented new ones. He performed them all with the casual uncomplaining air of one who has known the weight of time on his hands.

Now and again she tantalized him, apparently on sheer impulse born of

some feminine quirk. Invariably he failed to notice that such occasions were carefully chosen.

Thus, for example, there was that moment he stood at the west end, close by the wall, looking longingly at the top and sensing once more the urge to go out and do battle and shout with triumph until exhausted. His eyes were shining, his chest was out, brown-skinned with hairs upon it.

She came silently behind him, noting every detail, and said, "See here, Rugbust, I—" Then she turned and fled for her life, long slender legs moving with the grace of a ballet-dancer's.

Three jumps behind her he collided with the door of the instrument shed as she slammed it against him. He could hear her squealing with excitement. Scrambling onto the roof, his muscles bulged as he began to tear up a sheet and make a gap big enough to drop through. She came out and immediately he realized that he'd been fooled. Her wings had been hidden within. She emerged on white pinions, soared gracefully, waggled pink toes just beyond leaping distance from his head.

Perforce he had to go back to the house, don his own wings. It was near nightfall before he got her at tremendous height in the base of a cloud. By then he was tired and hungry, precisely as she had calculated.

None of this went into the autorecorder. The blithe waste of propulsive power was part of the mating game and there were no dutiful confessions for the ears of others.

They did not have a real difference until a hundred days later when he came in for the noon meal and found flowers upon the table. He glowered at the blooms, then at her.

"Where did you get these?"

"In the jungle." The reply was made with disturbing matter-of-factness as she placed a steaming dish upon the table and seated herself.

"So you have been outside the walls without my knowledge while my attention was diverted elsewhere?"

"Of course."

"There are dangerous creatures in the jungle."

"I know it."

He was chewing his bottom lip and glowering at her now. "You could be torn to pieces."

"So could you." Her eyes came up, faintly accusing and at the same time expressing the resignation of one who has tried in vain to control a mischievous child.

"I know how to look after myself."

"So do I."

"Hah!" he exclaimed. "Hah!"

She snapped at him. "All right, Fungus-front, go out and see for yourself. It's just over the south wall."

Giving her a look he went out, investigated, came back and said, "You killed it while you had both feet on the ground. You beamed it face to face."

"That's me," she admitted. "Man to man!"

"It wasn't a man. Neither are you."

Putting shapely elbows on the table she rested her chin in one hand and made her voice sugar-sweet. "What I like about you is your swift grasp of things."

"Then how about this?" he retorted, making a quick grab across the table, fingers crooked for a coil of thick red hair.

The snatch missed solely because the table jumped. The floor jumped with it. The house performed a brief jig. A dull cavernous rumbling sounded from east to west. The stony ramparts quivered along their full length. The rumble ended in a faraway crack.

"What was that?" she asked, sitting erect, wide-eyed, startled.

"A quake." He leaned back, stared at his grabbing hand while he cooled off. "They come once in awhile. Elsewhere they're more frequent and much more violent. Elsewhere they're really something!"

She thought it over for awhile, said suddenly, "Do you believe in precognition?"

"It is a subject that has been argued for a thousand years and will be for another thousand. I have no opinion

about it." He studied her curiously. "Why do you ask?"

"To take unnecessary risks is against the rules. Yet despite that, despite your training, despite my attempts to divert you, the jungle calls you—until you obey." Her long fingers toyed with each other nervously.

"So last evening, when you thought yourself unobserved, you went outside with your bow. And this morning I went outside for flowers—the flowers you have never brought me."

He flinched at that and began, "I would gladly bring them if you did not criticize the getting and—"

"You misunderstand me. I am not criticizing you. Not any more." The hands folded. "You see I feel as you do—I yearn to go outside."

"You do?"

"The desire grows, encouraged by your bad example." Her gaze upon him was thoughtful, speculative. "Do you suppose that something may be impelling us to get accustomed to the jungle—while there is time?"

It made him vaguely uneasy.

"Instinct is a peculiar thing," she went on. "It comes to animals and birds as a mixture of precognition and ancestral memory and helps them survive." The steadiness of her gaze unsettled him as she finished, "Why do *you* crave the green hell?"

"I get restless."

"Why?"

"Kind of have the fidgets sometimes."

"Why?"

"Oh, heck!" he said, giving it up.

"Take me with you next time you go out," she pleaded. "Two together are safer than one—and I get such a wonderful feeling of freedom beyond the walls."

It was his turn to come back with, "Why?"

"Because I know that this world will take us only on its own terms. Not on ours but on its own. We must be ready."

"My luck," he commented, making a mock-frown at the ceiling. "Just my luck. I need a Companion who is pink and soft and warm and understanding.

I pick one and what do I get? A seer! A long-legged second-sighter! A prophet of disaster! A red witch!"

"Think of the remarkable children we could have," she jibed. "With your hair and my magical powers. Furry demons."

"Be quiet," he ordered. His shoulders hunched to rid themselves of a cold little shiver. There are jokes—and there are jokes.

CHAPTER VII

Rejected

DISASTER came in the midsummer of Edham's eighth year and his Companion's second. There was no warning, no preliminary sounding of some deep note of doom. Indeed at first there was nothing to show that an experiment was being ended in order that a new one might begin. All that happened was that the sun shone.

It was the first time they had seen the sun from this planet's surface. Up to date there had been only the great blanket of cloud overhead, darkening or glowing and pouring heat by day, deepening the nights and hiding the stars. Always the fierce primary had been concealed.

Now the clouds broke widely, revealing a bronze-blue sky in which the sun burned with awful vim and sent down stinging rays. Edham studied it through a dark glass, saw a great spot upon its tormented surface. The visual radio-scope in his instrument shed picked up a mass of flickering shadows and swiftly changing checkered patterns indicative of violent disturbances across all bands.

By day and by night the heat was terrific. At first it did not bother the red-haired Companion. She came from Ultra-Dise, a planet far hotter than Dise itself, and thus was well fitted to endure the blaze. But as the sun burned on, week upon week, she began to wilt along with the barely surviving plants,

along with the wilting jungle.

In the seventh week the last tortured Disian plant gave up its eight-year-old battle and lay in the hot dust. Smoke from fires in the dehydrated jungle drifted over the walled area, brought with it a stench of burning flesh and hide. A small quake came, followed by another and another while still the orb flamed in the sky and the shrinking rivers steamed.

With the death of the last *bodhi* tree the Companion's uncomplaining endurance ended. She posed taut but tired in the hot shadow of the instrument shed, looked across the barren area shimmering with heat-waves.

"There is that deep cave we found in the mountainside far across the river. It is cool, comfortable and has water at its back. I think it might have been better had we moved there when first we discovered it."

"A Granor does not desert his post for the sake of comfort." He wiped his forehead with the back of a hairy hand, kept his eyes away from the blazing thing in the sky.

"I know, I know. I am with you while there is duty to be done." She surveyed the dust of their hopes. "There is now no post to desert—nothing but four walls. The alien sun has eaten everything. Are we going to let it consume us too?"

"We should hang on and wait for Rafael," he said.

"What—for at least another year and a half? Of what use to Rafael are whitened bones?"

"We have enough food."

"One cannot live on food alone. One must have water and sleep. One *must* have sleep." She eyed him slantwise. "How much have you slept?"

"Little. It is too hot. We must suffer until the clouds come back."

"Not me," she declared flatly. "What is left to merit the suffering? Nothing! Tonight I shall slumber peacefully in the cool of the cave even if I sleep alone, even if it is my last sleep on this world." With that she went for her wings.

He remained, pondering gloomily. After awhile he put on his wings and

followed her—as she had known he would.

They were asleep in the cave ten nights afterward when the great quake that shook their mountain range flattened the distant plantation's south wall, blocked the west river, created a great, shallow stinking lake which lapped close to the remaining ramparts. Thirsty monsters, half-crazed by heat, made the lake their drinking-place, the broken area their stamping-ground.

Throughout the following week Edham battled more savage life-forms than he had tackled in any one year. Under the merciless sun he swooped down wide-winged, beamed them away from the house, rescued packages of food and took them to the cave. He made trips by night, expecting less opposition, but they were there in even greater numbers, red-toothed and eager for him.

Thus the food stocks were laboriously reduced in loads pitifully small. The cost approximated one killing per package plus the risk of his own violent ending. The area swarmed with ferocious forms as did every place within easy reach of water. The world screamed for water and, having got it, wanted flesh.

On something over his one hundredth trip he returned to the cave so borne down by his burden that he barely escaped the brown scalded tops of trees from which menacing worms had long vanished. At that point his propulsor expired. Too-frequent usage and heavy overloading had dried up the power source. The wings were useless.

Food is more important than flight. Using his Companion's equipment he continued the trips, transported to the cave more than half the stock of the distant house before the second propulsor failed. They were landbound. They were at one with the animals, the things that crept through the shadows and could never reach the sky.

It seemed a major blow to Edham since the remaining stores now were ten days' march away with every step disputed. To his Companion it was a secret relief. Now she had him close by and did not have to scan the skies at every

flight, praying for his safe return.

Both beam projectors continued to function long after clouds had reappeared to hide the sun and right through the raging winter. One petered out with the spring—the other eighty days later. They turned to bows, fought the reviving jungle, consumed its fruits, ate of its flesh, grew heavy yet more agile.

They quaffed the undistilled water which seeped from the rock at the back of the cave and they did not fall ill, they did not die. Neither the water nor the food nor the past torment of that violent sun made them diseased or misshapen.

No change was apparent to them except that the longer they knew the jungle the more it seemed like home—for they did not realize that they had developed a swift, abiding fury equal to its own.

ETERNAL hope kept them from being completely absorbed by this world. No matter how powerfully surged the passions it induced within them they held fast to respective memories of Dise and Ultra-Dise and to the dream of being found on Rafel's return.

Yet, strangely, along with the desire to be discovered lurked another frequently-repressed wish that neither mentioned to the other and that they denied even to themselves—the hope that discovery would not mean removal. This world had not yet taken them body and soul but it was establishing by insidious means a claim that grew stronger tempor by tempor, day by day.

"I have found golden grain to the east, Bristle-body. I don't know how or why the animals have missed it. Big, beautiful heads of grain."

"Probably it isn't fit to eat."

"I tried it on myself a week ago."

"You—" His deeply tanned face went taut. "You might have died."

"So might you this morning when you fought that beast which we did not need for meat."

"It was interested in the cave. I permit nothing near the cave." He bunched a fist. "I am Man!"

"Then you can make me a stone

grinder," she said. "If I had a grinder I could make flour and bread and cakes."

"Cakes!" he spat. "In this place."

"You'll see," she promised, not the least bit disturbed by his attitude. "Fruit cakes and meat patties. Real food!"

"Forbidden food."

"What else is there?"

"The packages I took such pains to get."

"They will not last. Eventually we shall have to subsist only on what this world has to offer and chance what it does to us. We might as well start now. I'm not afraid."

"Not afraid but impetuous."

She studied his heavily muscular body, clad in the colorful skin of some animal he had slaughtered, shifted her gaze to the powerful bow grasped in his right hand and said, "Listen to who's talking."

"I will make a grinder and you can have your cakes," he agreed, conscious of unspoken accusations. "And may the stars preserve us!"

"From what? From this world's fruits? We have been eating them already and flesh as well. Can *more* fruit do any worse?"

"If their dangerous properties are accumulative we can step over the margin between enough and too much. Besides you and I might gorge ourselves to the limit of our capacity without ill effect upon ourselves but—but—"

"Our children?"

"Yes."

She took a step toward him. "Do you wish for children?"

"Do you?" he countered.

"Of course."

"No matter what they may be like—or *not* like?"

"They would still be ours," she pointed out.

"Unrecognizably perhaps."

"I would always know my own regardless—and I am not afraid."

"But as I have already said you are impetuous," he gave back more gently. "Wouldn't it be better first to wait for the vessel and learn our fate?"

"Perhaps," she admitted relaxing.

She watched him as he tightened his bow, watched him stride down the path from the cave and enter between the trees. Something far back in the trees screamed its anger at his coming while she still watched.

"A-a-ah!"

THE great vessel from Dise—it was like some misty figment of a bygone dream. A phantom of the past, hoped for yet feared.

A thing of dreams it seemed when at last it did come down. Deep in their cave at dead of night they heard a whine come through the sky and resolve itself to the thunderous roar of hot venturis.

They ran to the cave's mouth, saw a ring of crimson spears floating over the distant plantation. The spears shortened, went out. Thunder ceased. For a moment they gazed at each other like people who have seen the impossible come to pass.

Edham got the tiny signal generator which he had rescued from the house, drew out its telescopic antenna, cranked the handle bemusedly. Somewhere over there, far away in the dark, loops were swinging to get his bearing. But his thoughts were not of that. They were of the threatening upheaval to his way of life.

Winged members of the crew arrived and took them high above the trees, back to the ship. There was huge excitement and much congratulating before they were passed along to the examiners.

The poking and prying was much longer, more tedious than before and almost unbearably irritating—but the decision came more quickly.

Rafel summoned them before him. "The plantation has ceased to exist through no fault of yours. All Digrowths have long gone, this world having proved too much for them." His tones were solemn, regretful. "In the circumstances we must reject this planet. It is unsuitable for settlement." Then he added, "But I can comfort Jolin by telling him that he was not entirely wrong."

Edham said, "How do you mean?"

"I said this planet is of no use to us. Someday it may be. We have tried it too early, many centuries too early."

"So it seems," commented Edham, dryly. "If we two can survive among the beasts, so can others."

Rafel shot back at him, "In what shape?"

There was no effective answer, no answer at all. Edham fidgeted with the sheer impotence of it, stared back at him, said nothing.

"I have the examiners' report here," Rafel went on, eyeing the written scroll. "I am not permitted to give it to you in detail but I can state the conclusions. They say you may stay here or return to Dise—at your own choice."

Silent up to that moment the redhead shrewdly noted his forced impassiveness, asked, "Suppose we elect to go back, what then?"

With great reluctance, Rafel told her, "There must be no issue of your association."

"So that's the snag. Always a Companion but never a mother."

"I am sorry. Truly I am sorry. The basic law must be obeyed even when it thwarts the rights of individuals, and that law says Disians remain Disians now and forevermore. The law says un-Disians are non-Disians except when scientifically produced under proper control. Much as I would like to do so, for your sake it is beyond the power of a mere ship's commander to modify a basic law and—"

"I prefer to stay," she interrupted. Her air was too positive, too decided to permit argument.

Rafel's gaze moved inquiringly to Edham, who responded with, "Since you reject it this world is ours, entirely ours, every stick and stone of it ours! Who would surrender a world for the comfort of Dise?"

"You sadden me," said Rafel. He sighed resignedly. "So be it. I shall put a red mark against this planet to indicate that it is not condemned for all time, that it may be suitable in the future." With slight emphasis, looking

at Edham, he repeated, "The distant future."

"I know what you mean," Edham assured. "And I do not care. A Granor does not care—can you believe that?"

"Most certainly. To be a Granor one must not care—much."

"Anyway I've a feeling about this," chipped in the Companion, blithely exercising her feminine precognition. "In the distant future to which you refer the next visit may be from *here*. What of the law of Dise then?"

"They will permit the unavoidable," remarked Edham, giving Rafel no time to reply.

Frowning a little Rafel shrugged it off. "We shall give you new wings, new beam projectors, anything else you may require. They will last awhile and be of some help. More than that I cannot do. When those things are exhausted there will be no further help and you will have to continue as best you can."

"We have managed without them. We can do so again."

"I know. I shall make a full report upon it. Your names will be honored in your respective colleges and you will be remembered."

"While we hasten to forget," remarked Edham.

It embarrassed Rafel. He covered up by saying, "May the eternal stars be with you," and went away.

In due time Edham watched the ship go up and noted with only a hint of surprise that the finality of its departure created no emotion within him. There were queer insubstantial tentacles holding him to the dirt of this restless world,

alienating him from that other world of his youth. His psychic shape had changed invisibly.

It was geohypnosis, the cunning fascination of a sphere.

The ship went through the clouds. In silence they used their new wings to transport equipment to the cave. The task was easier this time for the great vessel's blasting arrival and fiery departure had driven every hostile form from the vicinity.

Three-walled, open-ended and dead beneath the twilight sky, the area that once had been a place of hope held them musing a little while on their final trip. In the days when it flourished and was thought of as a sometime-city the woman had blessed it with its future name. To please her he had carved it upon the wall now broken by one belly-heave of a world not yet ready for names or walls.

He was gazing set-faced at the shattered name when she asked, "What is the matter?"

"I am laughing."

She grasped his hand. "Come—come with me."

So together they fled from Para-Dise and set forth into the land and begat many children, all of their own shape but none truly of their kind.

The first was a murderer.

The second, his victim.

The fifth had a yellow skin and tilted eyes.

Only the tenth had red hair.

The twelfth was born black.

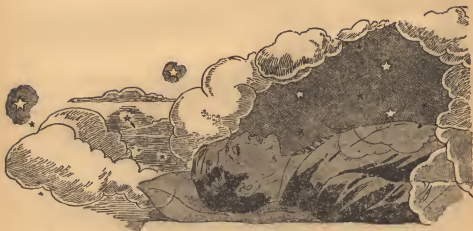
But the seed of this seed subdued and mastered the stormy world which some call Terra.



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The TENTH DEGREE



CHAPTER I

Hidden Foes

MMARGOT HOLMES, bride of the Nizam Hassan ben Sabah XVIII of Molahidstan, picked up the gold plated telephone in the boudoir of her Pasadena palace. She said, "Hello," in the low vibrant voice that had helped, along with her blond beauty, to make her a reigning cinema belle, listened to the crackling accents of "Dapper Dan" Wilstach, production chief of her employers, Colossal Films.

"Listen, baby," he told his most valuable human property, "Rita just died at Los Angeles Hospital."

"No!" said the actress, frankly horrified. "But you told me it was nothing serious. And she was all right this afternoon on the set."

"You don't know the half of it," said the producer, his voice thin with strain. "There's going to be a post-mortem. The doctors seem to think there was something off-color about it."

"But that's absurd," said Margot, tossing back the long golden mane of her hair in an unconscious gesture of defiance at fate. "How could anyone possibly hurt Rita—and why? She was



so darned decent to everyone."

"It's driving me out of my mind," said the producer. "Listen—you think I want this sort of publicity? But they found something—a poisoned dart in her back. Sure, I know it couldn't have happened. But it did."

"Poor Rita," said Margot softly. "She was a lot more than a maid to me."

"I know," said Dapper Dan. "Is there anything the studio can do?"

"No, I'll take care of things with her family myself," Margot told him. Then, frowning, "But how—why—who?"

"We're going crazy and so are the cops," the producer told her. "Somebody got her through a dressing room window apparently."

"Yes," said Margot, chilling, "and she was fitting a new costume of mine." Rita had done considerable duty as a stand-in for her mistress.

"We've thought of that already," Dapper Dan told her. "We've already got guards on their way to keep your grounds clear of prowlers."

"Thanks, Dan," said the actress. "But how could anyone have got into the

courtyard to kill her?"

"It's insane," said Wilstach. "One of the script girls claims she saw a big streamlined trailer in there—and a bunch of guys with turbans. She didn't pay any attention at the time but it wasn't there when she went back. And get this"—the producer's voice was suddenly ice-hard—"We aren't shooting a single Oriental production on the lot. But don't worry, baby. Everything's under control."

Margot hung up and sat on the foot of the divan, her hands clasped so tightly the knuckles showed white. Rita was dead—her one personal link with the Margot Holmes who had come out of the home of an obscure Scranton high school history teacher to work her way up the ladder of show business.

HER brothers and sister had long since drifted into marriage and careers of their own in remote parts of the country. Her parents were dead and the old house in Scranton had been torn down to make way for a supermarket. She—Margot Holmes, bride of the Nizam of Molahidstan—was now utterly alone.

There was a soft knock at the door of her boudoir and for a moment terror rose to engulf her. It would be one of *them*—her husband or his slyly obsequious vizier, Ibn ul Melik, perhaps one of the other catlike Orientals who moved swiftly, efficiently and anonymously about their duties in this honey-moon house that had become, for her, a house of horror. Her voice trembled as she said, "Come in."

It was Ben, her husband, and he came to her and picked her up and she was rigid and shivering in his arms. His strong sensitive mouth turned tender in the smile of his sad concern. She met his dark eyes almost furtively and then her fears dissolved into tears and she pressed close against him, sobbing and clinging like a little girl.

"Darling, I know how fond you were of Rita," he told her gently when at length the spell had subsided. "But you mustn't let it overwhelm you. Remem-

ber, Margot, you still have me."

"Oh, yes, Ben sweet, but it's not that," she said and the fear came rushing back. After all, who was this man she had married just two months before after her European vacation had developed into a whirlwind courtship that had made headlines around the world? How, despite the passion which had drawn them to one another, could she tell what he was thinking, planning?

"What is it then?" he asked her. "I have a right to know."

Yes, she thought, he had a right—if he did not already know. She sat down at a luxurious dressing table, topped by near-regiments of costly and decorative bottles, jars of scent and cosmetics, and attempted to repair the ravages of tears. Her voice was unnaturally staccato as she talked.

"First it was Chi-Chi," she said. Chi-Chi, a tiny North African monkey, was the first present the Nizam had given her, shortly after their celebrated first meeting at Cannes. Chi-Chi, almost unnaturally smart, had become almost as fond of his mistress as of sweets, had been as delightful as a kitten that would never grow up.

But, ten days ago, Chi-Chi had died. Rita had found him, doubled up and stiff, his tiny hands on his swollen little abdomen, lying beside a ripped-open box of liqueur-filled bonbons on the chaise longue in this very room.

"It's ill-luck," said the Nizam gravely. "Sooner or later, Margot, we must all grow accustomed to the fact that all which lives must die. It is a mark of maturity."

"I'm aware of that," said Margot, almost coldly. There had been her parents—her youngest brother killed over Schweinfurt in a bombing raid during the war—there had been others.

"Those candies were sent to me," she went on. "Chi-Chi ate some of them and died. Now Rita is dead. She was murdered in my dressing room by a poisoned dart—wearing *my* costume."

"Ben," she turned now and looked up at him frankly, "don't tell me I'm

crazy. But someone is trying very hard to kill me. Do you have any idea who it could be?"

He stared at her, his eyes oddly flat. He said, "That's a very peculiar question to ask me, don't you think?"

"I know it, darling," she told him. "I'm sorry—but I've been feeling the darnedest sense of hostility around here, of smug anticipation of something about to happen. Rita felt it."

"I too am worried," he said, his eyes once more flat and unreadable. "Darling, there is something I must do—for if by any chance—" He shook his head, ran a hand over his brown hair. "No," he said, more to himself than to her. "It isn't possible. *They wouldn't dare.*"

"Who wouldn't dare what?" inquired Margot practically. Not in his arms she felt the fears begin to rise like mists from the floor, to engulf her slowly with their dreadful half-seen shapes.

"To harm you," said the Nizam quietly, and beneath his iron control she could sense the rage—a rage that gave her comfort.

"Why harm me?" said Margot.

"Because I love you too much for their liking," her husband told her, his eyes soft. "Perhaps I shouldn't have married you. I'm not my own master. Remember I am the head of a religion as well as a people. But I never thought they'd dare to try to harm you."

"They haven't yet," said Margot quickly, hating to see her husband so miserable. "And if you hadn't married me I think I'd have—"

"But they will keep on trying," he said, interrupting as if he hadn't heard her final words. "They'll keep on trying unless I—" He looked through her, his eyes hard. "I've got to go to them and stop it. Only I can."

"Where must you go, Ben?" she asked. But he merely shook his head and held both her hands briefly.

"I can't tell you, darling," he said. "Trust me." He strode from the room.

SHE lay awake long that night but he did not return. And at six in the morning she was roused from fitful

slumber by a call from the studio. She got up, sorely missing Rita, dressed haphazardly and without the aid of her usual cup of coffee, drove to the studio alone in her low-slung high-powered little Jaguar, followed by a police car. She wondered what good they were against a menace already inside.

The day proved exhausting. Nothing went right on the set and Margot sat around interminably, waiting for shooting to begin. Technical hitches caused work to be called at three in the afternoon.

Margot drove into Los Angeles, to the Mexican Quarter, where Rita's family lived. There she had to fight her way through the curious and the autograph seekers before she could get inside to convey her sympathies and discuss with Rita's weeping mother and sisters what arrangements were to be made. She agreed to take on Miguelita, youngest of the Mendez girls, in Rita's place. Somehow it seemed altogether fitting.

This concluded, Margot fought her way out through an even larger crowd that swarmed over and around her car and drove alone through the twilight to Pasadena. There she entered the huge mausoleum of a mansion—memorial to a Midwestern meat packers millions of dead hogs—and was informed by a smirking turbaned servant that the Nizam was not at home.

"Where is he?" she asked, feeling suddenly ready to cry.

"He do not say. He go early last night," said the Oriental.

"Very well, Raif," she said. "I'd like to know when he gets back." She went on into her room, feeling lonely and forlorn. Within her was a growing knot of added worry—worry about Ben. It was the first time since their Riviera courtship that she had not known where he was, with whom and what doing.

She thought of having dinner in her room, for she was very tired. But memory of Chi-Chi and Rita clung to her. The idea of eating alone, wondering which mouthful she took might be her last, terrified her.

After awhile she stirred herself, donned black slacks and jersey, drew her long golden hair up under a black jockey cap and hid her green eyes and much of her face behind tinted glasses. She got into the Jaguar and drove to an obscure drive-in where she ate in security and unrecognized.

Back in Pasadena, Raif informed her, still smirking, that the Nizam had not yet returned. Margot nodded curtly, went back to her room, paced the deep-pile carpet, smoking. She was no longer in a state of nerves where she could sit and wait.

Ibn ul Melik, the vizier, would know where Ben was. Much as she hated to approach the vizier on anything, she knew she was going to have to consult him now. She had to know where Ben was, what he was doing, when she could expect to see him again.

She moved swiftly through the deserted corridors of the immense mansion to Ibn ul Melik's suite. On the threshold she paused, hearing voices—Ibn's and that of another man. For one wild moment she thought it was Ben. But there was a trace of alien accent under the suave British tones of this second voice.

She slipped quietly into the foyer of the suite, peered from the shelter of chartreuse damask drapes into the drawing room, whence the voices were sounding. For some unexplained reason she had no desire to reveal herself until she learned what was up.

It seemed at first glance that Ibn was standing alone, talking to himself in two voices. The vizier was standing with his back to her, facing an open desk-secretary of Louis Quinze design. But somehow, from his stillness when the strange voice sounded, his animation when he talked himself, she realized he was not alone.

Puzzled, she shifted position, the better to see around him—and stopped breathing, paralyzed by what she saw.

Ibn was speaking respectfully to a large transparent globe within the secretary—a globe which held a dark-skinned white-whiskered head framed

by a shimmering jeweled gold turban. And the disembodied head was talking back to him!

Margot clutched the curtains to keep from falling—for she had a sudden sense of forces around her, forces closing in on her, forces which were beyond all mortal ken as she knew it. The impossible was happening—and for some reason Ben and she were in the very center of this vortex of lethal and inexplicable doings.

CHAPTER II

The Talking Head

THE head was speaking in measured tones.

Ibn answered: "No, it is better that we speak in English—the servants are not so likely to understand. I can only inform Your Holiness that abominably bad luck has dogged our efforts!"

The bewhiskered head was handsome—handsome in the way of the hawk or the vulture, with high-arched nose, thin lips and eyes that pierced like twin daggers. It was a noble face—proud and used to command—a noble face and terrifying withal.

"Luck—ill luck—is the result of incomplete and faulty planning," said the thin lips. The accents were low, controlled, but there was a lash in every syllable. "You have bungled miserably, Ibn ul Melik. You have bungled twice. Now the Nizam himself is here and presents great difficulties. The fool is so hopelessly enamored of his actress bride that he spurns the beauties of paradise. She should long since have been removed without his knowledge. Now the problem has become extremely difficult."

"I hear, Your Holiness," said the vizier, cringing a little, as if from a physical blow. "What should I do next, Holiness?"

"You can do nothing where you are at present," said the hawk-faced man

in the globe. "It would be best, before we take necessary steps to amend this setback, that you visit us to become better acquainted with the situation here."

"I hear, Holiness," said Ibn, bowing low. Before he could straighten, the turbaned head had vanished like the light in a bulb when the switch is turned off. Ibn picked up the globe, set it carefully back in a recess of the secretary, closed it.

Margot withdrew silently and passed into one on the way to her rooms. She lit a cigarette with a platinum lighter-and-case that bore her initials in sapphires—a wedding gift from Dapper Dan Wilstach.

There was evidently some sort of a conspiracy directed at Ben which demanded her own removal from the scene. Ibn was in it, but only as an agent—the agent of the hawklike old man with the white whiskers and jeweled turban. She recalled the cruel cast of his countenance and felt a shiver run up her spine.

And that globe—Margot was well acquainted with the most modern developments in television. But she had never seen anything like it. It was three-dimensional and in perfect color, almost as if the head itself were contained in the crystal transparency.

There was something else about it even more remarkable—as Ibn had picked it up it had been briefly silhouetted against a lamp in the corner. And Margot was willing to swear upon a stack of Bibles, Talmuds or Korans that not a wire or any other visible connection extended from its slim supporting base.

Something old and cunning and very deadly had claimed Chi-Chi and Rita, now held her husband. Something that defied both reason and imagination. She eyed the telephone on the table by the chaise longue and thought of calling Dapper Dan or the Pasadena police.

She could raise a first-class row, all right, but would this bring Ben back to her from wherever he had gone? Would it be any insurance that she would not herself die unexpectedly and

in anguish from some horrible poison?

She could not explain the talking globe with its disembodied head. She did not even know whence the voice and head came. If Rita were only with her—Rita with her shrewd under-class instinct for practicality, her solid good sense, her devotion. But Rita was gone—already claimed as victim by whatever it was that was seeking the ruin of her marriage and her own death.

She lit another cigarette and her green eyes narrowed as she slipped the platinum-and-sapphire case-and-lighter back into a pocket of her slacks. Ibn had said that he was going to wherever Ben was being held within the hour. Margot ceased her pacing as she considered how she could follow him.

MOMENTS later she left the house. Her low-slung Jaguar was still in the driveway and she backed it into the garage. Through its windshield she could see the lights in the vizier's rooms at the near end of the house.

His shadow appeared, first at one window, then flicking past another. She wondered what a vizier could do even for a prince in such a small household. The title, after all, was that of an Oriental Prime Minister. But Ibn seemed more like a glorified servant or male governess.

She distrusted him utterly.

The lights in his rooms went out but he did not appear at the front door. She heard another door open and shut, the noise not loud but audible on the clear night air. She strained her eyes, afraid of losing him and, through him, all trace of her husband.

He appeared, a silent form, moving rapidly through the gardens behind the house. Margot slipped out of the car, plucking a heavy niblick from the golf bag—the Nizam's—that lay across the back of the seat.

She blessed the honesty of the citizens of the Mexican Quarter—for had they not been honest, surely golf bag and clubs alike would have been stolen while she left the car parked in front of Rita's home. She would not have

even this protection as she slipped out of the car and moved to follow the vizier, using the shrubs and hedges for cover.

As they progressed through the intricacies of the garden Margot began to sense Ibn's destination—a rectangular concrete structure, well covered with ivy, at the rear of the grounds. She had been informed by the estate agent that it was used to store garden implements and certain of the more perishable garden plantings during the winter season.

It didn't make sense—but she followed resolutely, the niblick held tightly in her slim but strong right hand. He disappeared around a corner of the structure and she froze as, following him, her moccasined foot scraped gravel. But apparently she had not been heard because, by the sounds that came to her, Ibn was unlocking the door and opening it.

She waited until she heard it shut, then peeked. No one was in sight, so she catfooted it to the door, found the padlock hanging loose in the heavy iron staple and opened it. She slipped inside just as, to her horror, Ibn turned on the lights.

But they were dim and he never even looked back. The vizier moved away from her toward a strange thing which filled up about a quarter of the otherwise empty interior of the gardener's building. The famed perfection of the Holmes mouth went slack as she stared at it.

It resembled somewhat a miniature metal navy blimp. It was egg-shaped and its finish was dull and gleamed scarcely at all in the dim light. At its tallest it rose perhaps twelve feet from the concrete floor, was half again as long. It looked something like, she thought with sudden panic, a streamlined trailer.

But from its nose, diagonally like the antennae of some gigantic insect, sprouted a pair of strange helical arms. Their eccentric spirals reminded Margot vaguely of sprung bed springs, less vaguely of the odd geometric solids she had once viewed at an exhibition of

modern abstract sculpture in Hollywood. They glowed with a glassy brightness which gave off no suggestion of heat.

At first she thought there could be no opening in the surface of this eerie metal egg. Then Ibn touched its side in various places and the metal itself seemed to grow fluid and recede from what became miraculously a circular opening or doorway. Through it a brightly-lit and shining interior could be glimpsed.

Ibn, Margot saw, was going to enter the huge egg. And suddenly she sensed that the time for action had come—that it was then or—probably—never. Without conscious volition she moved swiftly and silently across the concrete floor, determined to prevent him from entering. She held the niblick with both hands.

She must have made some slight sound as she glided up behind his stooping form with the heavy golf club upraised. Without warning the vizier straightened and pivoted. His face froze in alarm as he saw her and he raised his arms to ward off her blow.

SHE struck with all the strength she could muster, felt the head of the steel-shafted club crash through the barrier of his arms and bite into his skull. She felt no pity—rather a savage sense of exaltation at having at last something to strike out at, something to hit. Ibn uttered an odd little gasp and slithered to the concrete, blood spurting from a cut in his scalp.

She turned her attention to the huge egg, peered inside. It resembled an opulent, windowless, air-conditioned little room. Curious, she scrambled into it. A sound from the garage made her tense, until she realized it was Ibn, snoring as he lay outside.

Then, without warning, all sound from without was cut off. Alarmed, Margot pivoted—and the strange self-forming circle of the entry port was now an unbroken expanse of gleaming wall. She was trapped inside this strange thing.

Suddenly everything around her seemed to whirl, to dissolve. The gleaming walls ran like water and their brilliance grew unbearable. She closed her eyes to shut it out, felt like a twig picked up by the caprice of a whirlwind. She blacked out.

She recovered consciousness uncounted minutes later—or hours or days. She couldn't tell. There was no definite sense of motion—but like the strange sharp tonality of a city street after a band has passed, there was a definite sense of something happening somewhere. Looking around her, feeling scared and shaken to the marrow, Margot discovered she had dropped the niblick outside on the garage floor.

She looked around her, saw that her surroundings had been planned not for mere comfort but for luxury. The rear portion of the chamber—which made up the forepart of the ovoid, ended sharply at a partition nine feet from the concave curve of the nose—was covered with a silken mattress as thick and soft as a down cushion.

"Designed for a bunch of old-fashioned Turks," she said and was startled to hear herself talking aloud.

She looked up to stare at a replica of the globe in which she had seen the head of the bewiskered old man earlier that evening in Ibn's rooms. It appeared to be attached to the curve of the ceiling near the nose.

For some time she stared at it, wondering if another head would appear in it and talk to her. She tried to tell herself that this whole business was some sort of nightmare from which she would in time awake, to find Ben sleeping by her side. But the minutes ticked by on her wristwatch and she did not awake.

All at once she felt—though the sensation was not describable in any terms she knew—that the motion which was not motion had ceased. Margot felt again the swivel of unknown forces that claimed her consciousness.

When she came out of it she was lying on the cushioned floor. Her eyes went to the wall, where the door had

appeared and vanished so strangely. All at once it began to draw back on itself and the opening reappeared. It grew wider—wider—and then a head appeared framed in its expanding circle. It was a dark-skinned, white-whiskered countenance which supported a jeweled turban.

CHAPTER III

Prisoner of Dimensions

IT was the man whose disembodied head she had seen in the strange globe in Ibn's drawing room earlier. He was tall and lean, surprisingly menacing in his gold-embroidered white satin Russian peasant's blouse and loose maroon breeches tucked into low soft leather boots that, like the shirt, were embroidered elaborately in gold.

"Welcome, Highness," he said, extending a helping hand as Margot climbed out of the odd vehicle which had brought her—where? She looked around her, saw that she was in some vast and lofty hall of Oriental design, with low-pointed arches, mosaic floor and ceiling and magnificent wall hangings of satin.

"I want my husband," she said brusquely. "You have him."

"We shall be glad to take you to him," said the man with the gold turban. He made a signal to the others who stood behind him—a roly-poly little man with unexpectedly sharp black eyes who wore a silver turban and a dark blue shirt embroidered with stars and crescents and a pair of what were evidently servants, strikingly clad in black-and-white robes and turbans.

"Just a moment," said Margot sharply. "I don't know who you are or where you're taking me. But if you don't get both my husband and myself back to Pasadena muy pronto you'll have the G-Men after you. Kidnaping is a Federal offense—and a capital one."

"G-Men—ah, yes, the American In-

vestigation Bureau," said the gold turban with a smile that cut like a scimitar. "I am very much afraid, Highness, that their jurisdiction does not extend here. Now, do you really wish to see the Nizam?"

"You know I do," snapped Margot, trying to avoid showing the fact that she was chilled with terror. Somehow she knew that the curved swords worn by the black-and-white servants had razor edges. It was not a movie set. It was real.

So deep was her panic that she was only half aware of the spacious and lofty luxury of the great rooms through which they passed. They came at last to a chamber hung with heavy white satin. Margot's escorts paused on the threshold and she alone stepped inside. Ben lay there, on a white satin couch, still and waxen white. His skin was cool to her touch.

"What have you done to him?" she said, her voice low and throbbing with anger.

"I regret Your Highness' perturbation," said the gold turban with an urbanity which ill suited the glint in his hawk eyes. "However, the Nizam's condition is of his own making. He has attained a state of self hypnosis which amounts to a trance. We have been unable to revive him."

"I don't believe you," said Margot. She bent over Ben, saw the almost unnoticeable rise and fall of his chest with relief. At least Ben was alive. Her problem now was to get both of them out of this place. She swung back to her captors.

"Okay," she said, tapping a cigarette on the back of her case, "now talk. What is this business all about anyway?"

"May I introduce myself?" said the gold-and-jeweled turban. "I have the honor to be Mohammed Rohn the Thirty-first, Grand Prior of New Alamut. This"—he indicated the roly poly silver turban—"is Yezed ud Karmath, Astronomer of the Molahid Order. Welcome to New Alamut, Margot Holmes."

"Listen, my fine Oriental friend,"

said Margot, green eyes narrowing. "If I'm not returned in a hurry—with Ben—it won't matter what you are or where. There has been too much publicity. You will find there is no place in the world where you can hide."

"Highness," said the astronomer named Yezed, "you still do not understand. You are no longer on the world as you know it."

"Perhaps," said Mohammed with his scimitar smile, "we can retire to the next room for talk." He smiled at Margot's hesitancy, added, "You will be able to watch your husband through the doorway every second if you so desire—though I fear he was withdrawn too deeply within himself to be reached by any of us."

MARGOT let them lead her through a doorway arched like a gate of the Taj Mahal into another luxurious compartment. New Alamut, Mohammed Rohn—the names rang alarm bells in Margot's photographic memory. For the first time the sect which gave its worship to her husband began to take on meaning. Molahids—the lost ones—but it meant far more than that.

"New Alamut," she mused aloud. "The old Alamut was destroyed by Hulgagu, field marshal of Temudjin, or Jinghis Khan, in the year twelve fifty-six by Christiana reckoning. But the Aga Khan, Rita Hayworth's father-in-law, is the Assassin line, not Ben."

"I had no idea the Nizam Hassan—whom you call Ben—had married so learned a bride," said Mohammed, looking mildly surprised. "Unfortunately, Highness, your learning does not go far enough."

"The Aga Khan is at best a collateral descendant of Rohn ud din, last of the Grand Priors in your recorded history," he went on serenely. "I on the contrary am his direct descendent. For Rohn ud Din, my ancestor, did not perish at the hand of the Mongols. Thanks to the saintly wisdom of Nassir ud din, his great astronomer, he was able to travel with some of his court where the Mongols could never find him."

"No one got away from the Mongols in those days," said Margot cynically.

"I had no idea that the Nizam Hassan or his bride was interested in Molahid history," said Mohammed Rokn.

"It puts a slightly different complexion on our problem," said the Astronomer Yezed, nodding to his sovereign. Margot had no intention of revealing the fact that what little she knew of Mongol and Assassin history had been taught her in forced feeding by her father, and that her memory stubbornly refused to loosen its grip on any written word it absorbed.

"How does it change things?" she asked sharply.

Again the two turbaned men exchanged significant glances. Then the so-called Grand Prior turned to her, smiling. "It may well make things easier," he said. "Your surprising acquaintance with our background suggests it might be wiser to make of you an ally rather than an enemy. It was fear of your—alien influence over the Nizam that caused us to—take steps against you."

"Try me," she said and neither of them appeared to sense the real defiance of her words.

The Grand Prior began to tell his story in his mellifluous deep voice. "Contrary to the history you have read, my dear, the Assassins or Molahids were not all hashish and murder," he said. "The lower degrees of the Order were made up of devout Islamites, who tilled the soil and lived according to the Prophet.

"In the sixth degree, when the Ismaelite doctrines were fully understood, the study of Aristotle, Pythagoras and Plato was and is practiced. Blind belief in tradition was exorcized. The seventh and eighth degrees taught assimilation of this principle with Islamic tenets and prepared the disciple for the ninth and final degree."

"Which states in substance," said Margot, closing her eyes briefly to visualize a page from Jeremiah Curtin, "that 'All that is said of creation and of a beginning describes in a simile the

origin and changes of matter. An apostle reveals to mankind that which heaven has revealed to him. For the sake of justice and order he adapts his religion to the needs of the race. The philosopher is free, is bound to nothing. Knowledge for him is sufficient, since it contains the truth, that toward which he is striving.'"

"Amazing!" murmured Yezed.

"Since you seem so well acquainted with the background of our story, I shall proceed," said the Grand Prior pontifically. "My direct ancestor, Rokn ud din was not destroyed by the Grand Khan—he sent a willing substitute in his place.

"Historians on Earth have rated him a fool—but if he seemed to disregard the needs of his kingdom it was because his advisors foresaw its inevitable ruin and his concern lay in perpetuating it beyond the reach of the Mongols.

"Nassir du din, his astronomer, was one of the greatest men of his time. It was he who mastered the Hindu gift of nirvana—even unto the teleportation beyond the usual realms of finite time and space. It was thus that he penetrated the future and was able to discover and master the time capsule and communicator which enabled you and the Nizam to reach New Alamut."

"Where is New Alamut?" Margot asked sharply. If she could only learn where they were she might somehow find a way back.

"It is not exactly anywhere, Highness," said Mohammed. "For Nassir ud din did more than transport himself through time—he also crossed dimensions. Which is not extraordinary for the two are really one—and he who masters the one, owns the other.

"Actually we don't know exactly where we are in finite terms—not even Yezed can compute it. For beyond the filter screen of our windows lies the everlasting black mist. Without the traveler that brought you and the globe communicators we would be lost forever in the criss-cross trails of other times and dimensions—on a world which none has ever seen. We remain

fixed in a stasis that makes contact with your world possible only through the instruments from the far future which Nassir ud din procured to save his master from Hulagu Khan."

"Really out of this world," muttered Margot cynically.

MOHAMMED bowed. "Naturally, our isolation created problems. We have no means of support save the loyalty of those who serve us on Earth—in the hope of being brought to the paradise of New Alamut. It is the job of the Nizam of the Molahid sect to see that his subjects labor to provide us with whatever we require in the way of food, drink, clothing, machinery—all that goes to make life bearable."

"I see," said Margot, looking around her at the evident prosperity of this sweet racket. "But how does my husband fit into it?"

"It has not been our custom to induct the Earthly Nizam before he comes of age," said Mohammed. "Of recent years the Vizier Ibn ul Melik has been our agent—or regent. Until recently we welcomed the Nizam's marriage to you, Highness, because it gave us an ideal instrument to transfer our connections with Earth from a looted and dying Europe and Asia to an opulent America.

"However, your husband has not proved tractable. He has thus far resolutely refused to cooperate, except under certain compulsions which we have not yet been able to make permanent. We summoned him here for further indoctrination, afraid that his entirely justified devotion to you, my dear, was the cause of his intransigence. He has found refuge from our coercion in a trance. However, we are more than glad to welcome you here. Perhaps you, being more worldly, will prove more amenable."

Margot stood up, slim, vibrant and defiant. "You mean, you want Ben to use my influence to milk every sucker he can find?"

"You express yourself crudely, my dear."

"It's not as crude as what I'm think-

ing," snapped Margot. "When I get back I'm going to see you prosecuted for all the law will stand."

"Perhaps, Your Highness would open that grille," said Yezed, nodding toward a beautifully carved ivory screen set in a far wall.

Margot strode to the grille, opened it. Behind it lay a window, cut through walls of stone a good six feet in thickness. No glass shielded the aperture—and yet, held by some invisible barrier lay thick black fog, the thickest and blackest she had ever seen. It looked as if it could be cut like a pie.

Margot shivered and closed the grille quickly. Gathering herself she turned—and shrank back against the grille. Mohammed and Yezed had vanished and a quartet of fierce-visaged Moslems barred her further passage into the room.

CHAPTER IV

Revolt in the Harem

APPREHENSIVELY Margot sat on a brocaded silk cushion and toyed with the food that rested in gold plates on a low-legged ebony table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Stubbornly she still wore dark slacks and jersey and moccasins—for although she was confined in a harem she had no intention of wearing the diaphanous balloon trousers and brief jackets of the other women who graced the immense suite of apartments in the castle.

She studied the women as they ate—sumptuously of beluga caviar, of rich paté de fois gras, of delicate fowl and asparagus Hollandaise, of strawberries in kirsch and vin rosée. No wonder, she thought, that most of them were disgustingly fat by Hollywood standards.

It was a good sixty hours since Margot had been forcibly confined apart from the Nizam and, were it not for the watch on her wrist, she would already have lost track of time in this eerie

world so closely bounded by eternal mists. She toyed with her food, unable to find appetite.

"You should eat," said one of the women, strolling over to Margot and eyeing the barely touched food on her little table. "Mohammed—His Holiness—does not like bony companions."

"The more reason for dieting," said Margot, in French like the other girl, a youthful if full-blown creature whose fair skin and deep mahogany hair made her almost as much a standout among the brunette odalisques as Margot herself.

The girl looked shocked. "You should not talk that way," she said. "It is your duty to serve His Holiness. Else why are you here? It is our joy and our greatest honor."

"What's your name?" Margot asked her. She was growing more than a little tired of the local propaganda.

"Farisa ud din Kaidana," said the girl, sinking to a cushion beside her. Margot offered her one of her dwindling stock of cigarettes, which was accepted a trifle fearfully.

"Try it," said Margot. "It looks a lot better than those ghastly water pipes you gals smoke. I'm here against my will. My husband is the Nizam Hassan ben Sabah and otherwise my duties belong to Dapper Dan Wilstach of Colossal Pictures in Hollywood."

"Of course—you are Margot Holmes. I've seen your movies in the grand salon," said the girl. She sighed. "It is such magic—but isn't life in Hollywood fearfully dangerous? Especially for a young woman who is not married?"

"You may have something there," said Margot thoughtfully. She studied Farisa ud din Kaidana, the germ of an idea coming into her not untalented blond head. The girl had near-perfect features, moved gracefully. If she had a good masseuse knock off twenty-five pounds she ought to show well in front of the cameras.

"But in Hollywood I am a free woman," she said. "I can earn a half million dollars a year by making only two pictures—and that's a lot of dinars even

when the government has taken its cut. I can marry or divorce whomever I wish. I can go wherever I please whenever I please and no one gives me permission—or refuses it."

"And the young men I have seen in some of the pictures," sighed Farisa, "are they really so fair and strong? Do you think I would have a chance in Hollywood?"

"I don't know that 'fair' is exactly the word to use on that gang of wolves," said Margot. She studied the girl again. "But I think you'd have a chance, if I were to sponsor you."

Margot's mind was hitting on all cylinders. Although she could converse with few of the harem women—most of them spoke only some sort of archaic Persian—she had not failed to gather that the Grand Prior's women's quarters were a hotbed of intrigue.

"But if I were to try to escape I should only be cast out to the mists," said Farisa, her huge brown eyes aglow with horror. "No one has ever come back." She shivered and, after a moment of silence, got up and walked away across the big room.

Currently, Margot supposed, Farisa was the harem favorite. At least she had been summoned by the suspiciously fat guards who patrolled the corridors beyond the satin and damask hung walls more than any other girl since Margot's incarceration.

THAT such favoritism had been the source of displeasure to most of the rest of the odalisques had not escaped the girl from Hollywood. Especially had it disturbed a rather heavy but attractive brunette whose face, while not beautiful even by harem standards, expressed both intelligence and passion. Margot had reason to suspect that this girl also resented her own presence. Therefore she was not exactly surprised, half an hour or so after Farisa had left her, to find the black-eyed brunette moving toward her.

"I am Tomara ul Babek," said the newcomer, sitting down beside her. "I am very anxious to talk to you."

"You speak excellent English," said Margot. Again she offered a cigarette, which was refused with curt politeness.

"I should," said Tomara. "I was reared here by an English governess. His Holiness likes to maintain his talents as a linguist through having us mistresses of various tongues."

"Nice work if he can get it," said Margot. Then, eyeing the girl speculatively, "You hate my being here, don't you?"

"I am not a fool," said Tomara. "Every day I am fighting a battle here."

She paused and let her eyes rove around the room.

"You're smarter than Farisa," said Margot.

"Farisa!" the name was a word of contempt. "She is new—that is all. Her day will end as will the days of others like her. But always His Holiness must eventually come back to Tomara."

"And now you're afraid of me," said Margot. "Well, don't be. I've got a husband and I didn't come here of my own free will. My one desire is to reclaim the Nizam and get back to Hollywood."

There was a long silence. Then at last Tomara said, "I believe you—but you will not always be able to hold out. His Holiness has ways—and he can be very persuasive."

"He'll have to be more than that," said Margot firmly.

"You have spirit and you are brave," said Tomara. "But you will not win. Mohammed will not rest. I have cause to know."

Margot shuddered. The prospect was unbearable. She still didn't quite believe it was happening. She regarded the dark-haired girl morosely through a haze of cigarette smoke.

"How much power have you got over the kids here?" she asked.

Tomara looked briefly puzzled, then her face cleared. "Oh—you mean, will they listen to what I say?"

"More than that, honey," said Margot. "Will they obey orders and keep shut about it?"

"It is possible," said Tomara evenly.

"Would you be willing to put pressure on them to get rid of both me and

Farisa?" said Margot quietly.

"Definitely," said Tomara. "You have made some plans?"

"It depends on you," said Margot, "and I don't want to wind up out there in the mists. How about it?"

"His Holiness would not send you outside under any conditions, Highness, until—well, until he has obtained from you whatever satisfaction he has in mind. It is a point to remember."

"Then you'll play ball?" said Margot anxiously. She didn't like trusting her life to this intriguing and bitter woman but no other course had occurred to her. And it was time to take action.

"Play ball?" the expression was plainly strange to Tomara. "You mean, co-operate?"

"In a nutshell, yes," said Margot.

"I'll do anything in my power to help," she said fiercely.

Thereafter, while Margot watched and did little, events moved with a swiftness that astonished her. As she saw Tomara talk to group after group of the sixty-seven girls and women who made up the Grand Prior's harem, she realized that conditions must long have been ripe for the sort of revolt Margot had in mind.

Only three of the girls objected and they were dealt with in a fashion so ruthless that Margot felt a little sick. When they tried to take word of the revolt to the guards they were quickly caught and stripped and lashed with metal-studded leather belts that all but flayed them. Gagged, they were not even able to scream.

WHEN the guards, roused by the sounds of the tussle, came in with scimitars unsheathed, they were brusquely informed by Tomara that some of the girls had been misbehaving and had been punished. The guards seemed to have little desire to become involved in such a fracas. They quickly withdrew to their posts.

"I am afraid," murmured Farisa, who was sticking close to Margot now that she knew the plan. "Suppose we are sent outside?"

"You and I are going to be sent to the real Earth," said Margot reassuringly. "Don't worry, baby, I'll take care of you."

"But we are only women," Farisa protested.

"Never underestimate the power of a woman," quoted Margot. She calmed the girl down by telling her of the wonders of Hollywood and New York and Paris until fear fled from her eyes.

"Since you speak French, we'll bring you on as a continental discovery," she told the frightened girl. "Let's see—we'll have to get you a new name—Farisa ud din Kaidana may sound glamorous in New Alamut but I'm afraid it won't do in the Hollywoods. Let's see."

They finally decided on Dana Faris, a reversal that could be French as well as anything else. Meanwhile, around them, plans proceeded apace. Finally Tomara joined them.

"If we pull this off," Margot suggested, "why don't you come along, too, Tomara? I have a hunch you'd like it back on Earth."

Tomara shook her head. "I have been considering the possibility," she replied. "But my life, my job, are here. And with you two out of the picture I'll have this show well in hand."

"Small puddle," said Margot and Tomara smiled.

"But large enough for me," she said. "Now—once more—what we will have to do is this. . . ."

Half an hour later one of the plump guards appeared and announced that His Holiness Mohammed Rohn, the Grand Prior, requested the presence of a half dozen of the girls to entertain a small group he had assembled in his gracious presence for dinner. The guard read off a list of names and waited.

Nothing happened. The eyes of all the other members of the harem, wives, concubines and slaves alike, turned to watch Tomara and Farisa, both of whose names were on the list.

"Well, come on," snapped the guard in high peevish tones. "His Holiness is waiting. Do you want me to get a lashing?"

"He'll have to wait longer," said Tomara quietly. She repeated her reply in English for Margot's benefit. The guard looked thunderstruck.

"This is no time for joking," he said a bit nervously. "His Holiness' humor has been poor for the last three days."

"We are not joking," Tomara replied. "Until His Holiness consents to grant us certain privileges he shall receive no service from us."

The guard turned pale beneath his dark skin. He muttered a few unintelligible phrases, turned on his slippers and stalked out of the huge harem chamber.

Moments later the curtains concealing the doorway to the rest of the vast palace were lifted. Four guards entered, ranged themselves on either side of the entry. A quick step sounded in the corridor and Mohammed himself entered and stopped short.

His gaze took in the scene, saw the eyes of the other women and girls on Margot, Tomara and Farisa. His thin cruel mouth curved in a faint ironical smile. He addressed them in English, evidently troubling to speak only to Margot and Tomara.

"It is evident," he said, "that I have made a mistake in placing a woman so untrained for harem life as you, Margot Holmes ben Sabah, in such surroundings against your will."

Margot rose, deliberately tugged at her jockey cap. She flicked ashes from the end of her cigarette.

"Relax, Your Royal Poobah," she said. "The girls will play ball—but you've got to get Ben and Farisa and me out of here or I'm afraid your love life is down the drain for keeps."

CHAPTER V

Beyond All Evil

WITH flashing eyes the Grand Prior stared at Margot.

"For such insolence," Mohammed

said, speaking in a voice barely above a whisper, "I could have you flayed alive."

"But you won't," Margot told him boldly. "For if you harm me in any way you will never bend the Nizam to your will."

"Time changes all things," said the Grand Prior but it was evident that she had scored, "What is it that you want?"

"Free passage for the Nizam and myself back to California," she told him. "And Farisa goes with us. I have promised her."

"So," said the Grand Prior, "our paradise is not good enough for you." He paused, lost in thought, then shot a rapid fire question at Yezed, who stood two paces to his rear. They conversed briefly in Persian and then Mohammed turned back to Margot.

"Come with me, Highness," he said, using the title with mockery. "You shall have your wish—on one condition."

"And what is that?" the movie actress countered warily.

"That you bring the Nizam from his trance," said the Grand Prior and there was something in his eyes she did not like. "Do not fear, Highness, if he has sufficient love for you he will hear you call him, even in the furthest flights of his nirvana."

Margot looked quickly at Tomara, who nodded faintly. She knew nothing of her husband's strange condition but judged it to be some sort of a stalemate he had adopted to stymie the Grand Prior's plan. Apparently they could do nothing with him until he emerged from his trance. She wondered if it weren't a trick.

"You will use no deceit?" she inquired. Mohammed made a deprecatory gesture as if she had been guilty of such a lapse.

"Nay and we shall in no way pursue you when you are safely back on Earth," said Mohammed. "You have the word of the Grand Prior, publicly given. It has served for many centuries."

"Very well," said Margot. "It will have to do. Come, Farisa." She still did not trust the Grand Prior and was men-

tally computing how best to put a check-rein on the Earthly activities of this refined version of Murder, Inc., after their return.

The girls followed them, carefully shepherded by the fat warders, to the white-satin chamber where the Nizam still lay in his trance. The Grand Prior checked the procession at the sill of the airy arch of the doorway and regarded Margot directly.

"The next move is yours," he said with the sardonic curve of his thin lips which Margot had come to dislike so greatly.

Margot hesitated, then went forward and bent over the couch with its white satin covers. She laid a hand on her husband's neck and felt a surge of relief pass through her as she could feel the faint pulse beat beneath her fingertips. She bent over him and her lips touched his—cold and unresponsive to the contact.

"Ben, darling," she said. "Ben, it's I, Margot. Can you hear me, darling? Ben, try to hear me. I want to get through."

Slowly his eyelids fluttered, then more rapidly. At last she found herself staring into them and felt the flood of relief. His sensitive mouth smiled at her faintly and one of his arms came up to press her side. She bent and kissed him again and this time there was no doubt about the response.

"The Tenth Degree," he whispered. "Darling, I've won! I never thought I'd get back to see you again." He tried to sit up but she held him on the pillow with a firm but gentle touch.

"We're still in New Alamut," she told him. "I—I came after you. But never mind that now. If you're well enough Mohammed is going to let us go back to Pasadena."

His fingers gripped hers hard and he was not to be denied this time as he struggled up to a sitting position. He looked pitifully pale and wasted away after his long coma. But his eyes were clear and he quickly took in his surroundings.

"Look well, oh Mohammed," he called, his voice thin but clear, to the Grand

Prior. "I warned you that your tactics would not avail against my knowledge and my love."

"You will need refreshments, Highness," said Mohammed. He clapped his hands and servants appeared, carrying fruit and a bowl of steaming clear beef soup, redolent of sherry, on chased silver trays. When Margot checked her husband's effort to partake of it, the Grand Prior smiled his faint and evil smile, came forward and, with a special spoon, took the first sip himself.

"You see," he told Margot reproachfully. "I am a man of my word. When you are ready you three may proceed to the ship and return to your home. My oath that you shall not be disturbed upon Earth shall be kept as well. You hear me, Highness?"

"I hear but I fail to understand," said the Nizam, frowning.

MARGOT rubbed her cheek against his and was grateful that the Grand Prior's slaves had seen fit to keep him shaved during the course of his long trance. She felt young and gay and happy as she had not since the death of Chi-Chi. She smiled at Farisa, who returned a tremulous curve of her full lips.

"How," said the Nizam to the Grand Prior, "do you plan to continue your operations on Earth hereafter?"

Mohammed shrugged. "We have stored well against this date," he said. "And there is Ibn, though I fear he will scarcely be able to conduct his labors in our behalf in America henceforth. Perhaps South America will prove a better Earthly base for us."

"I warn you, Mohammed," said Ben, whose color had improved with the taking of nourishment, "that I shall continue to do all in my power to thwart you. The day of the Assassins is past. My father so taught me and what I have seen of this anachronistic palace has only served to convince me that he was in the right."

"We can only bow to your whim," said the Grand Prior, suiting action to the word. "Now, if you are ready, Highness . . ."

"Come on, baby, let's get out of here," said Margot. She helped him up. After a few seconds, Ben was able to stand and walk unaided. They moved slowly toward the doorway and Margot extended a hand to Farisa, who seemed hesitant about following them.

Tomara, her intelligent face alert with interest, mouthed a farewell and thrust a magnificent platinum-set star-sapphire ring into Margot's hand. In return Margot gave her benefactress the platinum-and-sapphire cigarette-case-and-lighter.

"You should be able to drum up some cigarettes around here, Tomara," she whispered. "Good luck with the girls."

"It is you, I fear, who will need divine guidance," said the harem boss. She looked at Margot piercingly, then at Ben, then at the Grand Prior. She whispered, "Good-by," and then slipped into the rear ranks of the women who were crowded about.

Margot tried to dismiss her growing sense of unease. She could not help but feel that things had been going much too easily. The Grand Prior was simply not the sort of man to surrender without some further effort. She kept her eyes open for treachery at every step. It was a long long way to the egg-shaped ship.

But they accomplished the trip without incident. There, at one side of the great mosaic hall, sat the vessel with its oddly bright helical antennae. The mysterious door opened and first the Nizam, then Farisa, then Margot entered. They sat on the cushions, saw the door shut, felt the strange sense of movement that was not movement. Their senses whirled again. They were unconscious for nine minutes by Margot's watch.

"Is it going to take long?" asked Farisa in French when they recovered. Margot reassured her and held Ben close to her. He was suffering a reaction from the effort of walking through the palace to the ship after the long fast he had endured while in his trance.

"It was the only way I could stop them, darling," he told Margot. "I have been working toward it ever since I was a very small and rather naughty boy."

My father, who hated the bondage in which he, like all Molahids, is held, gave me his confidence early and taught me much—even of the Tenth Degree."

"You mentioned that when I waked you," said Margot. He looked into her eyes and smiled his thanks and she felt like a maid who is about to experience her very first kiss.

"Usually it is held that there are but Nine Degrees in the Ishmaelite faith," he told her. "But there is one higher still. It was attained by Nassir ud din, who plunged through space, time and crossed dimensions to save his master and himself from the Mongols. It can be attained only by the greatest self mastery. Only by attaining it could I hope to defeat the Grand Prior."

"And you thought you had achieved teleportation?" said Margot. She ruffled his uncovered hair. "Darling, isn't the whole thing like a horrid dream? Why did they want to poison me?"

"It's no dream," said the Nizam grimly. "They feared that you had too much influence over me for the good of the Order. I refused to believe they would dare—after all, technically if not in practise, I outrank the Grand Prior."

"But when they confronted me with the fact they intended to eliminate you, my dear, unless I agreed to their demands, I went into trance, seeking the Tenth Degree. I felt that only through its use, if I could be sufficiently blessed to attain it, could I save you. I failed, it appears, but you have saved us without its use."

"Aw," said Margot, suddenly blushing. "It was nothing but a little common sense. I told them to let us go or be minus one harem. Farisa, here, is part of the deal. She wants to try her luck in Hollywood. I think Dapper Dan will go for her."

"He might," said Ben. Then Margot, watching him, saw his face suddenly turn gray. Farisa shrieked and covered her face with her hands. Margot turned her head to see what was wrong. The door in the side of the egg-shaped ship had opened silently and beyond it was a barrier of impenetrable black mist—

mist which was already welling into the egg-shaped room which prisoned them.

"The dirty trickster!" said Margot numbly, all her worst presentiments realized. By misdirecting the machine the Prior had cast them to the mercies of the trans-dimensional fog from which no one had ever come back. Even as she looked the entrance blurred as the fog obscured it. Farisa screamed and screamed again and Margot buried her face in her hands.

SHE felt Ben's arm go around her, draw her close. His lips were next to her left ear. "Forget everything—blank out," he told her in hasty accents. "It's our only chance." Then he spoke rapidly away from her in French—repeating his command to Farisa. "Keep in close physical contact with me," he urged.

There was silence then, broken only by the labored breathing of the two women. The Nizam made no sound at all. Even the hand which touched Margot's had again turned cold as death. She lay there, trying not to fear, trying to let Ben's consciousness, buried deep as it was, flow through her own.

Though her eyes were closed she could almost see the slow envelopment of the mist about them. It touched her with clammy fingers that were not fingers, it became a tide that seemed sentient, that burned faintly, then more strongly, as if it were causing her very flesh to dissolve. Whatever it was it was fearful.

She wanted to scream but her lips would not open. She wanted to fling herself clear of it, to get away somehow from its embrace, but she lay as if caught in an immovable shell. And she had the feeling that her senses had ceased to be her own.

Then, suddenly, something new flooded through her, a sensation of awareness, of knowing deeper than any she had ever known. The mist was sentient—it was of itself a world and all the living things upon that world, in whose hard bony core lay the hidden recesses of New Alamut, like a non-malignant cancer.

She knew—and she was not afraid—and it was from Ben, her husband, that her knowledge stemmed. Knowing, the mist could not harm her for she was being removed from its grip. There were unseen, unimagined vistas of velvet black sky, of blazing suns and strange planets, of stars in unfamiliar pattern.

And then, at last, the mist was gone. She lay there, still unable to move, and Ben was leaning over her as, some immeasurable time before, she had leaned over him and sought to waken him from his trance. Slowly, slowly, she opened her eyes to meet his.

They were still in the ship and the door was still open—but instead of the mist the familiar outlines of the gardener's tool-and-plant building lay beyond. Margot gave a little cry and embraced Ben. Beyond him lay Farisa, still in a dead faint. He had brought all three of them through in safety.

"You did it, darling—the Tenth Degree!" she whispered. He nodded and she saw the ravages of his effort in his face. She rallied to help him from the egg-shaped vehicle, then to carry Farisa from it. The girl was beginning to show signs of coming out of her faint.

Ibn still lay on the floor and blood still welled from the cut in his scalp. Margot stared at him, stricken at the sudden shift in time, and even as she did Ibn stirred, sat up, his eyes going wide in alarm. He gave a hoarse cry and sprang for the door of the machine, which almost at once began to close behind him.

Strange vibrations rose around them and the ship began to grow faint. Margot, giving vent to a savage cry, lunged for her niblick and raced to the front of the ship. There she swung hard at the helical antennae, smashing at them as if they were snakes which had threatened

someone dear to her. They were already near-to-invisible as the steel club passed through them but there was a distant musical note as if very fine crystal had been shattered somewhere afar off.

"Margot!" cried Ben, horrified. "You have—"

"It was the only way," she said and, all at once, tears were streaming down her face. She hugged Ben close, sobbing against his chest. "It was the only way," she kept repeating.

"You're right, darling," the Nizam said simply. "Without it they can never get back. They must stay there—amid the mists."

"Come, darling," said Margot, managing a shaky smile. "We both look like the devil."

It was all a dream—until she saw the huge star sapphire in its alien setting on her third finger. Across from her, over Ben's shoulder, stood an uncertain Farisa, looking somehow very Hollywood indeed in her harem clothes.

"We've got a lot to tend to," said Margot, not seeking to fathom the distortion of time that had enabled her to live two and a half days in New Alamut while mere minutes went by in Pasadena.

The three of them moved slowly out into the gardens toward the house and Farisa gave a cry of amazement at the sight of the dark blue sky. Margot nodded and pointed out the moon, which lay, quarter full, just over the roof of the pink palace that was home.

But she clutched the blood-stained niblick tightly—for in the house there was one thing more to destroy. In her heart of hearts she hoped it would contain a gold-turbanned head framing a dark-skinned face surrounded by white whiskers when she shattered it to bits.

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NEXT ISSUE

CAPTAIN FAMINE

An Amazing Novelet of the Spaceways

By CLEVE CARTMILL



"Hold it," said Brown.
"It's harmless"

The BONE of by WILLIAM

YOU'LL forget your own name next," his mother had told him a hundred times when he was a kid.

He could recall the exact tones of amused rebuke. He could see the faint smile on the very red lips. Which was

odd, because those lips had paled into ashes twenty years ago. And now he had forgotten his own name.

*"I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born . . ."*

He could, too. It stood on a corner. It

There Is a Missing Link Between Mind and



CONTENTION

F. TEMPLE

was a dingy yellow color. There was a chop house next door but one. Just down the street the elevated crossed over. It was all like a crazy caricature of Van Gogh's painting of his yellow house at Arles, with the color washed out of it.

Yes, he could remember the house where he was born and named. But he could not remember what he was named.

Suddenly he was weary, sick of it.

"The devil with it—what does it matter?" he said aloud. There was no one

Matter, and Jud Parker Meets It Eye to Eye!

with him. There hadn't been for six months (was it?) now. But people who live alone get the habit of addressing themselves to the vacant air.

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. . . . Sweets to the sweet. . . . Sweet are the uses of adversity. . . . Hymn to Adversity, by Thomas Gray. . . . Was it Gray? Am I Thomas Gray? No, that's not the name. . . ."

Phrases linked by association continued to pull through his mind like an endless string of sausages. That was all the so-important subconscious mind really was: a vast repository of chance-associated words, phrases, impressions, ideas, where a crazy doodler played. Once he had had control of them. Now they controlled him.

A NEEDLE on a dial crept to a red mark, hesitated over it. Immediately his fingers ran spider-wise over a keyboard. The overheated venturas were given rest while their fellows took over. The ship continued to accelerate toward the unknown planetoid. This was the final burst. The planetoid lay ahead, a bright crescent hugging a black mystery to itself, big as the Moon seen from Earth.

Earth! Where was Earth? It was one of those bright pinholes in the sable curtain outside the window. Oh, the answer was in his charts, all right. Only, to plot the position of Earth when you were not sure of your own position, or of your memory, your ability, your sanity . . .

He mustn't think that. He was a bit confused, that was all. As for his ability, he'd moved as smartly as a gunman switching those venturas. Automatic, in fact. Automatic with an automatic. . . .

His attention wandered again, and when it came back to the here and now it bumped into the idea that he'd been too automatic. His fingers had moved of themselves. He hadn't directed them or given them a thought. An automaton within him did that. A soulless creature built of conditioned reflexes and shaped by habit.

So there was a doodler and there was

an automaton. Neither was the real "he." Then who was? He was the guy who asked all the questions, such as "What's my name? and "Does it matter?"

Suddenly, it did matter.

"They should have foreseen it!" he cried to the outer darkness. "They are to blame!"

"They" were his Government. They had sent this hasty, inadequate fleet of two-men ships to explore, report on, and—more important—claim in their name as much of the asteroid belt as possible. As quickly as possible. Before a certain other Government beat them to it.

It was the scramble for America all over again. Only now there was not just one "New World" but a revolving shower of them. The atomic rocket drive had arrived before World Government, and Earth squirted rockets in all directions, each carrying as its vital cargo a bundle of stake-posts and flags.

There was an uneasy frontier on the Moon. America had dusty Mars, and the other Government floated the first raft on Venus. The moons of Saturn and Jupiter were roughly equidivided. Each Government had lost more ships than it dared tell its people, aiming for Mercury but providing, unintentionally, burnt offerings to the Sun.

No one had returned from Neptune or Pluto yet.

The land rush was at its height in the asteroid belt now. That region had been ignored until some astronomer had carelessly mentioned that in it were fourteen bodies containing over 1,000,000 square miles and more than two hundred bodies containing over 10,000 square miles. It totalled a desirable acreage. There was always the possibility that in it there was an acre ankle-deep in uranium. That was the goal, an El Dorado of uranium.

For in the atomic age Earth had used the fuel prodigally, and there wasn't much left for the new rocket drive. This was the last throw for more. The engines of the seven U. S. two-men ships were bread cast upon the waters. The

last of the bread, and that was why plumb center of the navigation panel of each ship was an illuminated notice sternly reminding the pilot that:

YOUR DUTY

1. Is to claim in your country's name as many asteroids as possible.
2. Is to keep going as long as your fuel, air and food lasts, which is an average minimum of 8 months.
3. Is to remember that a premature return to Earth (unless a Uranium deposit reaching Scale 60 is discovered) will be regarded as more than a wastage of fuel: it will be treated as treason. You have a sacred trust. (NOTE: Illness or even death of one of the crew will not be accepted as an excuse for return.)
4. Is to waste no time. Prospect carefully, record fully, but without delay; if you do not get there first, you will be too late.

The nameless one gazed at his notice now, and the weary, idiotic thoughts trailed through his head.

"... you will be too late. . . . *Never too Late to Mend*, by Charles Reade. (Is that my name? No.) Must re-read Reade. In re Reade . . . 'Reading maketh a full man.' . . . *Full many a flower is born to blush unseen . . . unseen . . . foreseen . . .*"

"They should have foreseen it," he said again, with no vehemence this time.

HIS fingers moved. He watched them detachedly. They turned the 70-ton ship tail-first to the planetoid and negotiated its descent.

It landed with two hardly perceptible bounces.

He turned to George and said: "Neat!"

Only George wasn't there. Their landing on the third planetoid hadn't been so neat. George had fractured his skull on a steel wall bracket and lay preserved forever in an airless rocky defile.

It was nice to recall his name had been George, though. He envied George.

His fingers seized a stylo and wrote busily: "*Planetoid 41. Point . . .*" And stopped. He cogitated and left a query mark there.

"*Landed 15.35 Western Pacific Time.*"

Again a pause. No, he didn't know what day it was. Or month, Or year.

"*Atmosphere . . .*" He took a sample. Oxygen, diluted with some inert gas. He couldn't quite get it, but it was harmless. Pretty thin, but enough to maintain him without a mask if he moved slowly.

"*Gravity . . .*" About a twentieth, he judged. He weighted his boots accordingly. He stepped out.

The cold assailed him and he buttoned his earflaps. His lungs were stabbed by ice-needles, but it became bearable presently. The blood-stream sang in his ears.

He looked around. Behind the ship stretched a wilderness of gray-black rock to the seemingly near and certainly curved horizon. Not a tree, not a shrub, not a lichen. The indigo sky swept down over it like the roof of a cave glittering with frost particles. He had felt lonely for so long now that it shouldn't have mattered. But that emptiness sent an ache through him, and he turned his back on it.

Before him the ground ran up to a ridge. Perhaps over the ridge the prospect would be better. He began to climb slowly, looking for vantage points for his feet.

"A better prospect . . . *Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile. . . . 'In durance vile' . . . vile bodies . . . bodies, bodies, bodies . . . John B—*"

"Hey, there!"

He looked up so sharply that he stumbled. He recovered himself and stood very still, gazing up at the man on the crest of the ridge. A man. A human man. Looking down at him and smiling. Dressed as he himself was, in U. S. Interplanetary Pioneers' uniform. One of his own kind.

He opened his mouth twice, and could say nothing. Slowly the tears gathered, and under that gentle gravity oozed down his cheeks and froze.

"Hiya," he said, finally. Oh, feeble, animal-like noise to greet his return to mankind! He wanted trumpets to sound over that desolate landscape.

He scrambled up the remainder of the slope and got there breathless, with his heart thumping like a jazz drum.

The man was still there. Still smiling, and now proffering him a cigarette. He took it with trembling fingers. A match flared redly, feeding on the oxygen.

The stranger had to keep it going for him for some time. The nameless one took a shuddering drag, and looked rather shyly at his companion.

It was strange. The face, young, bearded, pale but cheerful, looked familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"I've seen you before somewhere," he said, slowly.

"No doubt," the other smiled. "We're in the same outfit."

"I know, your name's John Brown." "And yours?"

"I . . . don't know. I seem to have forgotten."

"Is your buddy back in the ship?" asked Brown, jerking his thumb at the 70-ton ship standing on its tail at the bottom of the slope.

"No. He died . . . way back."

"So did mine. We had a crack-up on landing."

"Where's your ship now?"

"Not so far off," said Brown, carelessly.

THE nameless one looked down the far side of the ridge, seeking it. He saw only a panorama in general the same as the one behind him except that there seemed to have been a fall of snow in this direction. Large patches of white were spread out over the rocks. One reached almost to the crest on which they stood.

"What's that?" he asked. "Snow? Frost? Chalk outcroppings?"

"That, pal," said Brown, "is the intelligent life on this planetoid. Come down and I'll show you. You're going to be surprised."

The nameless one took a deliberate drag at his cigarette. It was an unbelievable pleasure. It was the first consciously deliberate action he had taken for weeks. It showed the measure of his returning self-control. He had become an integrated being again. The mere presence of a fellow-man had stimulat-

ed him into pulling himself together.

He was no automaton-cum-dreamer now. He was a man, a spaceman of much experience. He was case-hardened. Momentarily, he felt jaunty.

"Nothing would surprise me now," he said. "On P. 11 I found intelligent fiber life. On P. 15, electrically charged mercury balls running in mathematical curves over slate beds—I never had time to figure that one out, but there was intelligence behind it." He flicked his cigarette butt down the slope. "P. 29 was one great crystal, and a sentient one, at that. On P. 37 there were rubber—"

He stopped because the white patch just below them grew, very rapidly, an excrescence like a head and shoulders and arms, all white and shiny-surfaced. And a hand like a rubber glove reached out and caught the slowly falling butt, and placed it where the mouth would be on the head.

And, lo, there was a mouth, and a sketchy face, and the face conveyed enjoyment as the part-body puffed at the cigarette and sent tenuous blue clouds floating above its head.

The automaton in the nameless one whipped out his hand machine-gun, with its flat magazine packed with a hundred needle-thin, high-penetrating, explosive slugs.

"Hold it," said Brown. "It's harmless."

Consciousness resumed control. The nameless one put his gun back in its holster.

"If you say so," he said, rather jerkily. "What is it?"

Brown said: "All those white patches are some sort of gooeey stuff—something between protoplasm, gelatine, and soap-foam—which appears to mold itself into any shape it chooses. I've seen some queer shapes, but none of them has been inimical. They seem to favor the human form."

"Perhaps they're trying to be polite," said the nameless one. "Have you established any communication?"

He regarded the thing below, which looked like the bust of an early De

Chirico figure. It had smoked the butt into complete ash, and now sank back into its parent puddle.

"In a way," said Brown. "Come down among them and see what you can make of it."

The nameless one's confidence had grown so now that he assented with eagerness. He was filling out rapidly. He felt almost larger than life, headily strong. It was as though he'd just been released from the penitentiary after a ten-year stretch and it was a fine spring morning, and he was still young, and life could really start now.

"Free! Free!" said something inside him.

He wanted action. "Let's go!" he snapped, and went striding down the slope. But he had to slow up. There wasn't all that oxygen.

Brown followed. They skirted the proximate white patch. At close quarters its viscosity was plain, and there was a sheen over it like an earthworm's skin.

A bulge began to develop at the edge twenty yards ahead of them. It became a roughly globular blob that separated itself, with ligaments that thinned out like drawn chewing gum, broke and withdrew from the main mass. It squashed itself into a column a yard high. It took on, in the rough, the form of a child, a girl. There were suggestions of a short skirt, pigtails, and a pouting face.

As they approached it, it turned and began half slithering, half running away, its face turned back over its shoulder.

Thoughts, like a faint voice, spoke in the nameless one's mind.

"... tell my Mom you broke my Pansy, you nasty boy. Mom! Jud's broken Pansy . . ."

The shape swerved suddenly aside and back into the patch. It ran ever more slowly across the surface, seeming to sink into it as it progressed, as if it were running into a swamp. It became waist- and then shoulder-deep. The knob head and absurd white pigtails melted like candlegrease into the common flatness.

THE nameless one had stopped to watch it, but now he hardly observed it. It disappeared as he stood remembering.

"Hey, Brown," he said, as the other came up to him. "My name is Jud. I remember it now. Jud Parker."

"Glad to know you, Jud," said Brown, smiling. "What did you think—uh—uh, something fresh coming up."

It was an elephant, literally a white elephant. It rose, massive, in the center of the pool, complete, perfect. It began lumbering toward them.

Nearer, nearer, looming largely. A ghastly glimmering bulk with blank white eyes, trunk swaying, lurching directly toward them under the indigo sky.

Abruptly, Jud's gun leapt from its holster. Fifteen needles darted from the triple barrel and passed through the elephant. A thousand yards beyond it they hit a spur of rock and blew it to powder.

The elephant came on.

Jud's thoughts flew as fast as the bullets. The white patch was probably a comparatively thin layer with rock beneath it. He aimed at a point directly below the elephant and fired again. With a noise as of a great door slamming, the elephant flew apart like a bursting snowball, and chunks of black rock raced its white fragments through the thin air.

There was a dark crater where it had stood, and the surrounding white stuff oozed healingly into it.

Brown said: "Don't do that again. I told you these things were harmless. They are if you leave them alone. But if you go on blasting them like that you may find you've started something you'll wish you hadn't."

"They'd better learn to keep their distance from me," growled Jud, turning on him. "Now, look here, Brown, before we go on let's find out where we stand. I don't want to quarrel with you. Just meeting up with you has put new life into me. I'd been driven into a state of acute melancholia by loneliness. I want to keep you as a pal, as an insurance against insanity. How did you make out alone?"

"Not so hot. I guess I'm not meant to live alone."

"No man is," said Jud. "We're gregarious animals. That's one mistake our Government made—sending us out in pairs. If one croaks, the survivor is likely to become useless. As I did. Psychologically, three is the minimum party for rocket crews. They should have foreseen that."

"It was all done in such a hurry, racing the other crowd," said Brown. He sat himself down easily on a truncated cone of rock.

"Another thing they overlooked," went on Jud, "is that a man is part of his environment and *vice versa*. We're bundles of reflexes. We take our bearings from the familiar things—the houses, sidewalks, trees, customs, facial and verbal expressions—the things we know. When we're suddenly lifted up and dumped down in a totally different environment, we're lost for a while. We've left something of ourselves back in the old place. Getting accustomed to the new environment means waiting for that lost part of us to catch up."

"That's so," said Brown. "I remember my grandpop saying that when he went from New York to London by those old jet planes it took his psyche three days to catch up with him."

"I remember my grandpop saying the same thing. How would they have shaped up if they'd been stuck in *our* position? This is my forty-first planetoid in, say, seven months. Each one a completely different environment to adapt myself to. Not slightly different, as New York and London are. But totally different. Different air, sky, gravity, composition and the crazy forms of life you had to try to understand. And when you'd claimed the darn place and recorded the flora and fauna and mineral possibilities and began to feel not quite so lost you had to move on to the next surprise packet. There's bits of me scattered all over the asteroids. I had to move too fast for 'em to join up with me again. Boy, was I going to pieces!"

"Another governmental mistake—they should have barred introverts. However,

you seem to have pulled yourself together now," said the other, drily.

"Yep. And now I have you to share my rocket."

"You haven't," said Brown. "I'm staying here."

"What?" said Jud. It was a flat, mechanical exclamation. It seemed to drop lifelessly to the ground between them. He couldn't believe he'd heard aright, and didn't want to believe it. "What did you say?" he elaborated slowly.

"I said I'm staying here."

"But you said you weren't meant to live alone!"

"I shan't be alone here," said Brown. He looked past Jud. Jud turned, following his gaze. The white patches, which had been afar, had moved much closer to them, were converging on them. Each patch carried its passengers: doughy shapes, most of them quasi-human.

"Friends of yours?" asked Jud. He dropped his hand to his gun.

"Remember what I told you," admonished Brown. "Yes, they're friends of mine. And yours. Old friends. Remember any?"

JUD peered. Four patches were moving towards him, rafts, each carrying five or six clearly human forms and a heterogeneous collection of lumps and mounds and wavering objects. Certain peculiarities of stance and attitude struck him as familiar. But the faces were too distant yet, and too fluid, to put labels to them.

"I don't know," said Jud, doubtfully. "Who and what are they? Who's the head man among them?"

"The chief is called the Changeo."

"The Changeo? Odd name. . . . Say, there's that kid again. I know that kid. She lived next door to me in the Bronx, over twenty years ago. Lily, her name was. Lily White. I remember I went with her to the Bronx Park Zoo. I broke her doll."

"That's right," said Brown, indulgently. "Just after you'd both had a ride on the elephant. The elephant you just blew to shreds. Look, there it is, forming again on the far patch."

Jud stared wide-eyed at it, then swung the stare around upon Brown.

"How the blazes did you know about that?"

"I know everything that ever happened to you," said Brown, fingering his trim beard and regarding Jud pensively. "I'll refresh your memory. Take the nearest group. Reading from left to right, there's Bob Pitcher, who became Lily's boy friend, Nat Larkins, who used to play baseball with you in Brooklyn. Bridget O'Hara, whom you ran around with in Washington. Next to her—"

"George!" breathed Rud. He tried to say "George" again, and choked on the name. His heart had leaped like a frightened rabbit and was thudding in great bounds. His lips went stiff.

The white figure that was unmistakably George—closer now, like the others—smoothed the back of its head with one hand: a characteristic motion. George, whom he'd seen die on another world.

And to the trembling Jud there came the thought; the memory of a voice saying: "Let's hope we're the first arrivals on this one too. We don't want any shooting war."

George had said it every time they were bringing their ship in to land on a fresh planetoid. They'd been his last words before the crash landing that killed him.

Jud was shocked into movement. He whirled on Brown again.

"All these phantoms are coming out of my mind," he said, grimly. "But I'm not consciously projecting them. It's some kind of hypnosis. I don't know how you do it—I don't care. But I can guess who you are and what you're up to. You want to drag out of my mind all the dope I've collected about the asteroids we got to first. For your Government. Well, see here—"

He reached down to grab Brown by the arm and yank him to his feet.

The arm came off in his hand.

It was feather-light, as unsubstantial as soap lather. He squealed with surprise and disgust, and shook his fingers free of it. It floated gently to the ground.

It half drifted, half squirmed back to its motionless owner and joined on again.

Jud's stomach had had one jolt too many. He threw up.

Then he sat down and rested his swimming head in his hands.

Presently, when he looked up, he was in a closed ring of silent white figures: George, Nat, Bob, Lily and the rest—relatives, old pals, workmates, people he'd known only slightly—nearly thirty of them. And there were dimmer figures behind them, shading into obscurity. And objects like armchairs, radios, desks, bicycles, mechanical toys and go-carts lay on all sides, a far spreading pile of junk like the hoarded belongings of a lifetime, like the closing shots of that old classic, *Citizen Kane*.

Overhead the stars burned in the indigo sky. Only the dark crest-line of the ridge looked real, hard, tangible. The rest was an opium dream.

BBROWN was still sitting there on the flat-topped cone of rock, regarding him gravely.

Jud said wearily: "All right, I don't know a thing. I don't know what it's all about. This takes the prize as the craziest place I ever came to. I may have gone mad myself, but I don't think so. Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am the Changeo," said Brown. "I want nothing but to stay here."

"You're welcome. I want nothing but to go."

"You can't escape from your memories," said the Changeo. His restored arm made a sweep embracing the crowd.

"You're made of the same stuff as them. Are you a memory too?" asked Jud.

"In a way. But I'm nearer to you than that. They are shadows. They can only repeat what they said or did in the past. I am as real as you."

"There's something familiar about you, I admit. But . . . Brown? I don't know why I thought you were Brown. I never knew a Brown."

"That's only a name you pinned on me by chance. There are no such things as individual thoughts, ideas, or mem-

ories. One thought joins onto another by association. But you know your psychoanalysis and your James Joyce. Everyone thinks with a great tendency towards unconscious punning and word-twisting. The moment when you met me your mind was running from 'vile bodies' to 'John Brown's Body.' You labeled me John Brown."

"I see," said Jud. He surveyed the white shapes around them and he realized he was looking into his own mind, externalized. "I get it. I saw the white stuff. White. Lily White. White elephant. I broke her doll after an elephant ride at the Zoo. She never spoke to me again. She went with Bob Pitcher. Pitcher—baseball with Nat Larkins in Brooklyn. Brooklyn—Bridge—Bridget O'Hara, of Washington. Washington—George. . . I can trace it right back. Except . . . where do you fit in? The Changeo—that means nothing."

"You would like it to mean nothing," said the Changeo. "You are reluctant to admit I exist. You try to cloak me with meaninglessness. You are like people who say 'passed away' instead of 'died,' because they're frightened to face the reality of death. Trace it back. It's in your mind. I'll start you: 'Changeo' is a portmanteau word."

"Changeo . . . Change Geo?"

"Yes."

"Change Geo," murmured Jud. "Change Geo for what? Is it an anagram? Change Geo—to Ego?"

"Yes."

"That makes it Change Ego. I get it. *Alter Ego!* You are my *alter ego*."

"I am. This is the only place in the solar system where I can take up my separate existence. The only place where there is an abundance of this plasma. I'm not solid flesh, like you, but I'm halfway towards it, which is better than being a state of mind—a state of mind in constant conflict at that."

The voice of his other self was calm and level. It was conversational, charged with no emotion. It might have been the next-door neighbor remarking on the weather. But Jud sensed that the other's freedom was in some sense inimical to

his own. That whatever was the basic meaning of this fantastic charade, the whole set-up was a trap.

Covertly, he began to weigh the chances of breaking out.

Although the white shapes had moved to encompass him, they did not appear to be aware of him. Like a crowd of lunatics at exercise, they shambled in their circle around him, each living in a private world. They mouthed at invisible companions or used invisible tools or walked or stood in silent thought. They were haphazard memories from incidents he could now only partially recall.

He could make a guess at the nature of the plasma. It was that stuff whose existence the neurologists and physiologists had suspected for many years but had never been able to isolate on Earth: the missing link between mind and matter. It was intermediate stuff, like the mesons of atomic physics.

It was the long-sought connection between the electrical charge in the brain cell called a "thought" and the moving of a material arm or leg. The bridge between the anxiety neurosis and the duodenal ulcer.

It was the medium of Professor J. B. Rhine's demonstrable and proven P. K. effect.

As long ago as 1949, H. H. Price, Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford, had said: "*Every idea has an inherent tendency to manifest itself in physical form. P. K. is ideomotor operation occurring apart from the nervous system and muscles, instead of by means of them.*"

IT was a long shot, but perhaps the magligned, though much photographed, ectoplasm of the seance room had not invariably been cheese-cloth. There was the testimony of Crookes. . .

The end of the century had seen the slow crumbling of material science as a complete philosophy. The materialists were still clinging obstinately to their objective world, but a sea of subjective thought was washing their supports away.

They had produced their atomic drive

almost in desperation. "See!" they cried. "We have given you the key to the universe. Go forth now and everywhere you will find the confirmation of our beliefs."

But Jud knew when they came to Planetoid 41 their day would be over. Their empire would pass into the hands of the psychologists and the moralists, the real philosophers, the seers if not the saints.

He must escape, not only for his own sake, but to open the way to the more comprehensive science.

And suddenly he was seized with panic lest the Changeo knew his present thoughts.

He said, as casually as he could: "If you are my other self, you must look like me."

"I look as you did when you first joined the Pioneers, when you had a pretty good idea—and opinion—of your own appearance. That's a memory just below the level of your consciousness. It sank—like the memory of your name. You can't quite recall it."

"I've no idea of my present appearance," said Jud. "I only know my beard is longer and wilder, I haven't trimmed it in months." He was fingering it as he spoke.

(Surely the ring was thinnest down the slope? But he would have to go up the slope to make the ship. Wait. The shapes were still moving around. It was only a matter of time before the thin point would lie in a more favorable direction. Wait.)

Aloud, he said: "I suppose you were referring to being a part of my state of mind, in conflict?"

The Changeo crossed his legs and folded his arms and looked as if he were settling down to a nice long chat on a point of interest.

"Yes, Jud," he said. "There's a Changeo in the mind of every man. It arises inevitably from his physical makeup. As Alexis Carrell said, for every organic state there's a corresponding state of mind. The chromosomes in the body cells of a woman are in matched pairs. Not so in a man. He's impure in his chromosome makeup. His pairs all

consist of one large female-type chromosome and one smaller, different and much more active type. They're ill-matched companions. They pull different ways. Man is basically unbalanced. Beneath the surface of consciousness he is a civil war, a bone of contention."

For a moment Jud's attention was deflected. He was interested.

"I guess that's why there's a far higher percentage of insanity among males than among females," he said. "Ditto genius."

"Perhaps, D. H. Lawrence was a notable example, a genius and a walking civil war, if there ever was one. He knew of this basic conflict intuitively. He called the participants—that is, the chromosomes—the Will-to-Motion and the Will-to-Inertia."

"The actor and the dreamer," mused Jud.

"And I am the dreamer," said the Changeo. "You've never wanted to be tied to me and I can assure you the sentiment is mutual. You were a constant disturbance, interrupting my reverie, always dashing around seeking action and adventure. Always trying to break away from me—that's why you joined the Pioneers. But you slipped up there, you played into my hands. You lost cohesion, especially after the end of George and his reassurance, and it was I, the introspective one, who got on top."

"I know," said Jud, with a spasm of irritation. "You and your idle, pointless dreaming! A man has more important things to do than that."

The Changeo said, without resentment: "Meditation is the highest form of existence. The West has so much to learn from the East in that respect."

But Jud had returned his attention to the ring of white shapes, seeking the weakest point, not covertly now but openly and impatiently. He dropped his hand to the butt of his gun.

THE Changeo uncrossed his legs and stood up, extending a dissuading arm.

"Wait," he said. "You'll get nowhere by precipitate action. Because I'm sev-

ered from your mind in this place, you think you are free to act as you please. You are, but only so long as you remain in this place, where we can have separate existences. Stay here. The planetoid is big enough for both of us."

"What is there to do for me here?" blazed Jud. "Nothing but sit on my end and contemplate my navel and browse over my memory album. Stay here yourself. I'm getting out."

He fired several times at the thin point in the ring and blasted a clear gap. The memory images on either side of it were not perturbed, and continued their aimless movements.

He bounded through before the gap could close of itself. Outside, he had to stop, whooping for breath. Planetoid 41 hadn't the atmosphere for violent action. He recovered and started up the slope, looking over his shoulder. The ring had closed, the shapes seemed to be melting into one another and sinking and the plasma was subsiding slowly into a pool.

The Changeo wasn't there.

He was on the crest, waiting for Jud. Parker set his teeth and climbed. When he was in earshot, the Changeo called out:

"Must you always be an impulsive fool? You can't escape from me—"

"Try to stop me, you soap bubble!" growled Jud. "Out of my way!"

The Changeo shrugged his shoulders, folded his arms and stood there. He looked resigned.

"I see that separated from me you lack reason altogether," he said.

"Are you getting out of my path?"

"No."

Jud put a needle in a spot a foot below the crest. The hard explosion bit a nick in the crest-line and the Changeo became a white-flecked gray cloud which expanded rapidly and stood, a giant sentinel, on the ridge.

Chunks of rock rained down. One

grazed Jud's temple with searing heat and knocked him reeling. The blood poured down his cheek, ran and dripped from his beard. He was not aware of it. He was not aware of anything very much. His mind was spinning like a whirligig.

He staggered to the crest. Right below him, shining under the star-spotted indigo sky, was his ship. The robot in him took over.

"Return to ship. Close the door. Choose the venturas. Set the drive. Relax. Press the button. . . ."

He did all of these things.

Presently, the planetoid lay behind, a bright crescent, big as the Moon seen from Earth.

Earth! Where *was* Earth? It was one of those bright pinholes in the sable curtain outside the window. Oh, the answer was in his charts, all right. Only, to plot the position of Earth when you were not sure of your own position, or of your memory, your ability, or your sanity. . . .

He mustn't think that. He was a bit confused, that was all.

The robot in him dictated: five hundred kilometres out, set the course for the next Asteroid, No. 42. . . ."

"Wait." Somewhere at the back of his mind a dim thought struggled, and went on: "There's something important to take back to Earth. . . . The mind-matter link. . . . Open up the broader understanding for mankind. . . . The reign of physical science ended. . . ."

"... will NOT be accepted as an excuse for return," said the illuminated notice on the control panel sternly. "Unless a Uranium deposit reaching Scale 60 . . ."

"Uranium deposit . . . Scale 60 . . . deposit Uranium in the scale. . . . The scales have fallen from my eyes. . . . I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help . . . help . . . help . . ."

But he was beyond help.

THE CYBERNETIC BRAINS, a novel of men and machines by Raymond F. Jones, plus a Captain Future novelet and many other stories in the September STARTLING STORIES—now on sale, 25c at all stands!



The Salad Citizens

By WALT SHELDON

*To be a social climber on Venus you had
to be a vegetarian—or a vegetable. . . .*

I LIKE to be different, and Bronson knew it.

"No gravy-blast landing now," he said in his stuffy, measured way, as we neared Venus. "A conventional involute orbit, please."

How do you like that? Afraid to trust

me with a gravy-blast, or straight-in approach. Me—the first guy to take a ship through the light barrier, even if it did disintegrate and keep me orbiting in a liferoid for thirty earth days. Me, the only guy who ever handled Martian red dust and lived to tell the tale. From

a hospital, of course, but just the same I told it.

So I gave Commander Richard Bronson a dirty look, which wasn't quite dirty enough, however, to smutch up his laundered whites and handsome profile. As usual, he looked as though he'd just stepped out of a shower. He was about forty—but the kind of forty women mean when they say a man isn't really attractive until he's forty.

"Okay," I growled. "Conventional orbit."

He nodded, cleared his throat and went back to the infrascopes to look some more at Venus.

I cut in the steering jets and swerved the *Hyacinth* into its curve. Takes a couple of days to do it this way—circling the planet and giving over to its gravity little by little—I could have gravity-blasted it in a matter of hours. But not with Bronson running things. He'd been on my neck ever since we left earth-pattern; sometimes I wished I'd never taken the job. But, at that, I could hardly turn down the honor of piloting the Second Venusian Expedition. Some'll try to tell you they couldn't find another pilot wacky enough to go along. But don't you believe that.

I yawned and started the long spiral in.

BRONSON stayed at the scopes.

"Whatcha looking at now?" I called over my shoulder.

"Heaven knows." He sighed, and shook his head sadly. "I can see below the cloud layer, but it isn't of much use. All I can see is green."

"Maybe it's St. Patrick's day on Venus," I said.

He became stern. "Captain James," he said—he wouldn't call me Pete, like everybody else does—"Venus is no joking matter."

"Sure," I said. "I know that. Why do you think I came along? I could be working a nice, cushy moon run, getting ready to die of old age if I wanted to."

"Nor is this expedition," he went on, as though he hadn't heard me, and at

that maybe he hadn't, "one to provide you with a setting for the sort of cheap adventure you seem to prize so highly."

"Oh, moon-juice," I said, and turned back to the control panel.

He was right, only he didn't have to be so stuffy about it. I knew well enough that this was the first Venusian trip in a score of years, and only the invention of the decel had made it possible. Before this nearly every ship heading for Venus had to overshoot, and most of them got drawn into the sun. All except the ship of the *First Venusian Expedition*, which had sent a message that they were landing and had then disappeared from the ken of man. The members of this second bunch kind of had hopes of finding them. Or traces of them.

So I orbited on.

After a while Della came into the control room and I began to feel a lot better about things in general.

"Hello, Pete," she said, nodding to me—strictly in passing—and then with considerably more warmth to Bronson: "Hello, Dick. How's it look?"

We were darkside, but just the same the control room was full of sun. All Della has to do is walk someplace—and there is sun. Or its equivalent. She is blonde and about my height, which is tall for a woman; she is antelope-lean and walks as though an egg were on her head and she didn't want to break it. She is, in short, gorgeous. And I didn't worry about her impersonal smile in my direction. Takes time for dames to appreciate me; I have to kind of grow on them.

"Still can't see much," Bronson was saying, turning to her, and looking at her adoringly, as any man in his right senses would. "Just foliage. Or green stuff, anyway. But you're the botanist—maybe it will make sense to you."

She looked. It didn't. She kept looking, anyway. Commander Richard Bronson slipped his arm around her waist.

I unwrapped a piece of Martian salt candy and began to munch on it.

"Look here—what are you eating?" Bronson asked me suddenly.

I told him.

"Captain James," he said, "you know better than that. You know that only approved rations are to be eaten on a trip like this."

"Agh, moon-juice," I said again, and tossed the salt candy on the floor.

Regulations were fine in some ways—and in many cases it was best to stick to the pills and concentrates that were supposed to nourish you in space. But I've seen too many guys get weak in both the body and the head from bulk hunger. After all, I've been knocking around space a long time.

I went back to piloting until my relief came, and then spent the next few earth days paying attention strictly to business. Everybody, in fact, was busy getting ready for planetfall. Pretty soon we went deep in Venus's cloud layer and watched the iridescent, poisonous stuff swirl by the ports and bubbles, and we kept the ship entirely on orth. The spectro clicked away at the land. They found, after a while, a huge flat place that wasn't all choked with foliage like the rest of the surface, and it was there that we landed.

I was with the first group to set foot on Venus. We stood in the hatchway, waiting for the final results on the atmosphere and ray tests.

Bronson looked at me coldly. "Where is your space suit, Captain?"

"Look," I said, "what did we all take chemical modification in the bio-bay for if we're going to wear space suits?"

"The space suit is a double precaution," said Bronson. "You'll have to wear it."

"Exploring in a space suit!" I said disgustedly. "It's like washing your feet with your socks on."

Just the same I put one on. I didn't want anybody to get the idea I was uncooperative.

WE all descended finally to a broad, flat green plain covered with short grass. Very short, but thick; like mohair nap. There was cloud cover everywhere and the light was milky and unreal. Everything was moist. The meteorologist was muttering about how

remarkably the moisture hugged the surface, and how this had probably led early Twentieth Century astronomers to believe there was no H_2O on Venus.

"We'll spectromap this big green plain pretty thoroughly," Bronson said. "There's a good chance the First Expedition might have landed here."

And so the handlers began to unload, and the bio-crew began to set up its field station and the telenews bunch began to whirr cameras at everything. I had nothing in particular to do. I looked around. I saw the long wall of foliage over to the left, where the jungle began, and decided to wander over there.

The jungle was incredibly thick, all of it. Trunks and reeds and branches and creepers and tendrils and leaves—all matted together like loose hair after you brush a Persian cat. And each of these things in varied, sometimes crazy shapes. Some were hard, some thorny, some knife-edged. Most of this vegetable matter, I noticed, had a very rubbery consistency, too.

I tried pulling some. It snapped.

I grinned. Here was an idea—I'd make a slingshot. I can always think of things like that, you see, to keep myself from getting bored. I unsheathed my knife and looked around for the most suitable tendrils. I liked the long, flat ones that grew from a plant that seemed to run around six feet tall. This specimen came out of the ground in two trunks, which merged into one a couple of feet from the ground, and then ended in a large, cabbage-size, pinkish blossom at the top. I stepped toward one of the plants.

It pulled its two trunks out of the ground with a soft, sucking noise, and then it walked away from me.

I watched, interested, for a moment, as the thing snapped and stretched itself so that it could disappear into the thickness of the jungle. Suddenly—with cold-water shock—it came to me what I had seen. A plant walking. I brought my head up quickly, bumping my nose on the inner surface of the plastibubble.

"Holy, blinding red dust of Mars!" I said.

"What? What did you say?" came Bronson's voice.

I'd forgotten I was on communicator. Bronson was talking to me from the vicinity of the space ship.

"Commander," I said, "you better come over here. I just saw a plant get up and walk. Doggondest thing—"

"I'll get Della and be right over," Bronson said.

He and Della came along a few minutes later and I carefully told them what I'd seen and showed them exact spot where I'd seen it. I pointed out the kind of plant.

"This tall kind right here," I said. I drew my knife again. "Now watch." I walked toward it. It wouldn't budge. "That's funny," I said.

While they stood there, coldly waiting, I tried at least a dozen other similar plants and tried to get them to move. Not one would.

"Pete," asked Della, "you haven't been chewing Martian buttons have you?"

"Or doing unauthorized eating and drinking?" Bronson put in quickly.

"Look—I saw the thing move. I swear it. I took a knife and walked over to it like this, and it got up and walked away. I saw it with my own eyes."

Bronson shook his head. "Maybe you ought to have a bio-psycho check, Captain. Maybe you've got a touch of space fatigue."

"Commander," I said, "why don't you go soak your head in a bucket of cosmic rays?" I turned on my heel and went back to ship.

Well, I had my bio-psycho check. It turned out that I was in perfect shape, physically and mentally. I could have told them that in the first place. Well, no difference. After the check there was nothing Bronson could do but let me go my own way. Which I darned well intended to do. I would investigate, because no animated hunk of spinach was going to make a Saturnian ape out of me.

The next time I set out for the jungle nobody bothered me. They were all deep in their work, now—charting, mapping, analyzing, recording. Science, unlimited.

Fine stuff for some people, I guess, but give me a little romance and adventure, personally. I felt expectant, tingly, out there by myself crossing this vast, green Venusian plain. I switched my communicator off. That felt so good that it gave me the further idea to get out of my clumsy space suit. When I got to the edge of the jungle I did just that.

I propped the space suit against a bush, leaving it plainly visible so I could find it again when I got back. Then I wandered.

I went north. I walked aimlessly along the edge of the thick growth. It felt fine to have air on my cheek again, even if it was hot, moist, sticky air. It was a thrill to inhale and enjoy the heavy fragrance of all the greenery everywhere.

EACH time I passed one of the plants with the two leg-like trunks—and they were everywhere—I examined it closely. Sometimes I would pretend to walk past one, then suddenly whirl at it, hoping I might startle it into movement. No soap. They just weren't walking this day. I looked at the roots and saw that they didn't penetrate very far. At least it would be *possible* for one to pick himself up and stroll off.

I wandered perhaps a mile. I found a little hummock and sat down on it and tried to think. All I could think about was that I was hungry.

One of those restless hunks of broccoli grew nearby. I kept looking at its pale, green, tender, juicy shoots and my mouth began to water. We'd been living on what amounted to a pill diet—those scientifically balanced concentrates—long enough for me to feel the beginnings of bulk hunger; the light-headedness and weakness and lassitude that gets space travelers after a while. The more I looked at this lovely Venusian green stuff the more I wanted it. It did cross my mind that it might be poisonous or something, but what the devil, I was the guy who'd handled Martian red dust and gotten away with it, wasn't I?

I plucked off a tendril and bit into it.

Well.

How can I describe the effect of that wondrous and unworldly greenery? It was like the crisp end of a grass shoot plucked from the meadow on a hot summer's day after a swim—your very first one at the age of nine or ten when everything is still delightful and new. The taste was sweet, but also light and clear. Kind of intoxicating, as a matter of fact.

I savored the stuff for a moment. Then I sat and waited to see if anything would happen to me. Nothing did. I tried another tendril and then another one after that. I guess I ate a dozen.

They must have been nourishing. I felt not only satisfied and full, but as though new strength suddenly had surged through my veins. I felt as though I might at this moment whip a pack of Saturnian apes with nothing sharper than a screw driver for a weapon.

I got up and did a little capering dance in the Venusian grass. Then I turned and headed south, back to the spot where I'd left my space suit.

I saw the bush—I was sure it was the same one. I'd picked it because it stood out from the jungle edge a little bit and was surrounded by three bright red flowers. I walked up to it, circled it, stared, and then scratched my head.

My space suit was gone.

I thought for a moment. I held my chin in my fingers. Then I let go of my chin and snapped my fingers. Of course. Bronson—Commander Richard Bronson—had taken it. He would. It was his nasty way of chiding me for taking it off. Now I'd have to go through a big orbit with him about breaking regulations and so forth. I shrugged, and turned to go back to the space ship.

Bronson was walking toward me. Della, in her smaller space suit, was beside him. I frowned, and stepped toward him too and I was just about to slip in the first punch by asking what the hell he'd done with my space suit, when he pointed to me. His voice came through the audio filter.

He said, "Where's your space suit, Captain?"

I said, "You ought to know, Commander."

He said, "If I knew I wouldn't be asking you."

And then it came to me that he wouldn't, either. He was much too stuffy even to indulge in a little bit of sarcasm.

I scowled and said, "I thought you took my space suit."

"I beg your pardon?" he said blankly.

"Look," I said, "let's back up carefully and start all over again."

This we did. Seemed that Bronson had just come to this spot, after seeing me stroll along the jungle's edge. He hadn't seen my space suit at all. I wouldn't have believed it, really—except that Della silently backed it all up.

"Well, then," I asked, "where the devil is the thing?" I started to look around. Right then I noticed the tracks. "Whoa," I said. "Look."

They followed my point. The indentations in the soft loam led from the bush into the jungle itself, and they were, without question—footprints.

Only they had been made by some kind of soft moccasins or sandals, clearly not by space boots. In other words, by no member of the expedition.

"Very interesting," said Bronson, scowling and bending over them.

I started to follow them.

"Captain," came Bronson's chilly voice, "just where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to find out who made these tracks. What else?"

"You're going back to the ship," he said. His head shook within the plati-bubble and his voice came through the speaker with a hard, electronic edge upon it. "Those footprints will be investigated by the guards. At the proper time. And under the proper circumstances."

"For Jupiter's sake, Bronson—"

"That's all, Captain," he said.

DELLA had no expression. She didn't even seem to disapprove. I looked at her, looked away, sighed, shrugged, and wondered how a gal like her could possibly fall for such a stuffy character

as Bronson. Especially with somebody like me around. Of course Bronson is a handsome kind of an egg, I have to admit, but certainly looks aren't everything, and if I were a gal I'd want a man with a little imagination and spunk. A man who liked to be different.

Well, all the next day the space guards beat the bush in that vicinity. Rough boys, they were, armed with Jenks nuclear guns—the weapons that were finally agreed upon during the Age of Wars in the Twentieth Century, you'll remember. They were agreed upon because they could kill people very neatly and efficiently without scorching the landscape. I didn't get to go with the space guards; I got tied up working with the engineering gang when the atom mesh control developed a bug.

But I saw their report later, and it may be said literally: they didn't find beans.

Bronson and a few others began to look at me suspiciously, and I have an idea they thought that not only did I hide my own space suit but somehow faked those tracks leading into the jungle. I went my own way—proud, dignified, and alone. To Mars with them.

It was just a few days later that the mild hunger hit me. For more of that tender, delicious grass shoot, I mean. I didn't recognize it as a craving, or anything like that—at first it just seemed to me that it would be nice if I could taste the stuff again.

Once more I wandered away from the ship, toward the jungle. I forgot my space-suit again; couldn't see that it made any difference anyway. I didn't wander far this time, I just hung around the edge of the foliage and picked tendrils for myself. They were superb. They got better and better. I repeated the performance on the following day, and then on the day after that. A week went by; I was having daily meals on the wonderful Venusian green stuff. No bulk hunger for me, by Jupiter. As for the others—the change in them was very gradual. . . .

They were busy, of course, constantly. They were cataloguing every pore,

every hair, every blackhead on the face of Venus, and the microfilms were beginning to stack high. All this hard work had something to do with their weakening, but the main thing, of course, was bulk hunger. That was the big reason everybody started to lose weight and get those characteristic sunken, droopy eyes. You've seen returned space castaways who have lived on pills and concentrates; you know what I mean. Tired, drawling speech and reactions not even quick enough to make a good double-take.

Happily, I was as bright and fresh as ever.

Bronson noticed it one morning and spoke to me about it. We were lined up with the rest at the nourishment table getting our breakfast concentrates. He eyed me suspiciously.

"You look mighty fresh and chipper. How do you do it?"

"A good clean life," I said blandly. "Right living, right thinking, right—"

"Moon-juice," he said.

I shrugged.

He kept eyeing me. "You haven't, by any chance, got a secret cache of fresh milk and beefsteak stowed away somewhere, have you?"

"Mr. Bronson, please," I said, with heavy injury.

"Or maybe you've been trying out some Venusian vegetables?"

"Now why would I do a thing like that?"

"I don't know. Unless just to do something you shouldn't." His look began to cast itself in bronze. "But I warn you—it's a dangerous practice. Della has only begun to analyze the plant life here. Some of the cells have animal characteristics. Some she can't figure out at all. At any rate, eating the stuff might be very harmful."

"It might." I smiled. "And then again, it might not. Sometimes a fellow has to take a chance to find these things out."

He looked at me for a long time. He blinked his cold, grey eyes only once in that whole period. He moistened his lips.

"I think maybe you'd better come along with us today," he said. "And

then I can keep an eye on you."

"Come along where?"

"We've found more footprints. It seems pretty clear now that there are some kind of inhabitants around here. We're going after them."

I grinned. "Brother—I wouldn't miss that for the world."

"Don't be too cheerful about it." Bronson didn't smile. "You're coming along because I'm not letting you out of my sight again. And I'm warning you—one thing out of line, and you'll be summarily and severely punished."

"Aw, rocket gas," I said, and walked away.

WELL, as it turned out, he wasn't kidding. About keeping me in his sight, I mean. Later, as the group of us started to cut our way through that Venusian jungle, I began to feel like Bronson's pet cocker spaniel. He wouldn't even let a twig get between us.

Which was something, considering the thickness of the jungle. Several husky guards led the way, hacking with bush knives. Only, because of their bulk hunger, their swings were weary and the going was slow. They made a kind of path which grew together again by the time the rear of the caravan came along. Meanwhile, the heavy air and the moisture were all around us, making leaden clubs of our arms and legs.

Then there was the silence. The thick silence which gave a flat, dead feeling to the senses and a kind of hollow numbness to the insides.

The footprints decided our course. All found so far seemed to head due west. That might mean something, or it might not. At any rate, the lead guard kept his solar compass pointed that way, and we followed. Della, who was marching near the rear, pushed forward after a while. She went right past me and touched Bronson's arm.

"Dick—"

"Hello, Della. What's the trouble? You look as though you've been through a wringer."

She smiled wanly. "I'll overlook the fact that no man should ever make a

statement like that to a woman, regardless of how she looks. The fact is, I feel as though I've been through a wringer. Or worse. I—I'm afraid I'm giving out, Dick. Couldn't we slow the pace just a little?"

He patted her hand. "Of course, Della. Of course." His eyes were faintly glassy. "Matter of fact, it's getting me, too. All of us, I think. Maybe we'd better take a rest before we push on. And a few nips of energy cake."

Della sighed. "That stuff again. When I get back I'm going to eat good, solid, chewy beefsteak and bowls of crisp, crunchy salad for the rest of my life. I'm going to—"

He patted her hand again and said, "Don't think about it." Then he gave the orders for the halt. Everybody flopped to the ground—you could hear the sighs of relief popping all around like milkweed pods in the fall.

Bronson looked around him wearily and said, "Just this once people, I think we can dispense with our space suits. We'll rest a lot better—"

He didn't have to say it a second time. In fact, he didn't even have to finish saying it a first time. Everybody slipped from the cumbersome things and flopped to the ground again. I took just long enough to pick a spot near Della.

A few minutes later I noticed that she kept staring at me in a peculiar way. At first I thought maybe she was just admiring me—waking up to the fact that whereas Dick Bronson is handsome, I have what you call character in my face. I smiled back pleasantly.

"How come," she said slowly, "you're not as knocked out as the rest of us?"

I shrugged, made a little gesture and a little laugh. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I just don't worry as much."

She held her steady look and the slow pacing of her words as she said quietly, "You've been eating Venusian vegetables."

"What makes you say that?"

"For one thing, the fact that you don't seem to be suffering from bulk hunger. For another thing—" she pointed—"your face. The color of your skin."

"The color of my skin?" I ran fingertips down my cheek.

"It has a greenish tinge."

"The hell it has."

She shrugged, reached into a pocket, and tossed me a compact. She said, "Look."

I opened to the mirror and looked. I looked for a long time, and frowned. It *did* look sort of green—but not enough, it seemed to me, to get excited about. I had an idea it wasn't the color of my skin at all—just the reflection of all that green light that seemed to be everywhere in the jungle.

I handed the compact back to Della and started to say, "A mere optical illusion—"

Exactly at that instant all Venusian hell broke loose.

Now, I've got to tell you this slowly, which wasn't how it happened at all. Everything came with a swooping bang, but in the space of that moment I could still notice details.

FIRST of all, the *things* came out of the jungle. They came from all sides. They oozed out. That was because they were elastic and could slip through and around places like the walking plants I'd seen. Only these weren't exactly walking plants; *they were, as much as anything, plant-like men*. Maybe thirty or forty of them. I stared, stupefied, as did everyone else. I latched my stare to the nearest *thing*, the one that came at a sickening, steady pace toward Della and me.

Tall as a man, it was, with a body, a head, two arms, two legs. But it was covered from head to foot with curled, matted green foliage. The limbs were loose and flowing—with only the suggestion of joints and bones in the right places. Flowering tendrils grew from the ears.

None of these things spoke nor made a noise of any kind beyond a leafy rustling as they moved. But the way they moved—slowly, purposefully—told us plenty.

The Jenks nuclear guns started to fizz in all directions. You know about the

Jenks principle; it affects only mammalian life and was adopted toward the close of the Age of Wars so that forests and parks and fields of grain would be spared. Fat lot of good it did with these green characters—men, plants, whatever they were.

A guard stepped between me and the nearest plant-man, leveled his pistol and fizzed it. He held the trigger down, kept it down. The invisible rays went right through the plant-man. No damage whatsoever. The plant-man kept coming. The guard finally threw the pistol into his face, then yanked the bush knife from its scabbard. He started to swing. . . .

He wasn't fast enough. I could see why. I could see that this was going to be the trouble with everybody in the group—they just wouldn't be quick enough on the uptake because they were all suffering from bulk hunger!

The plant-man's tendril-like arms came out, curled themselves in a whip-lash circle about the guard's neck and pulled tight. His scream was choked off. His face turned red, then pale. He tore at the thing's foliage with his hands and his movements became weaker and weaker.

"Pete!"

That was Della's voice, cutting into my jelled state of horror. I turned and looked at her. I was still in a kind of daze. Her face was oyster-white, and her grey eyes were searching mine.

"It's—it's up to you, now," she said. "You're the only one strong enough—"

That snapped me out of it. She was right. I was the only one who'd been getting any green vegetables, any bulk. That scientific, concentrated diet is fine, but real food still works better. I leaped forward and grabbed the guard's fallen bush knife.

Now you know by now that I don't like to brag unnecessarily, but I must say that in the next few moments I was—well, magnificent. The only word for it: magnificent. I had plenty of pep, and I'm a pretty healthy, pretty rough customer to begin with. Before I stepped in I took one swift gander at the overall

situation. The plant men had just about everybody in the group in their tendrils and they were starting in on some wholesale strangulation.

I jumped; I swung; I slashed. I was all over the place with that bush knife. I hacked those verdant characters into a thousand pieces. None made any noise—they bled sap instead of blood, and, like plants, they didn't exactly die—they would have to wilt first. They didn't even fall unless I cut their trunk-like legs from under them. They couldn't have had any feeling, as we know it.

I won't dwell on how many I hacked. They must have had some kind of dim intelligence; they saw after a while that I was just too much for them, and they began to fall back. The ones who could still move melted into the foliage.

Bronson picked himself up. He had fallen after being nearly choked to death by one of the animated asparagus. He stood there, chest heaving, handsome profile high, and between breaths he managed to gasp out an order.

"B-back! Back to the ship everybody!"

I looked at him, and grinned impudently. I just wanted him to know that it ought to be pretty clear by now who was the real hero of this thing.

I walked right past him to where Della stood. She was swaying a little, and I took her arm. She let me. She smiled, "Thanks," and came along as I led her.

"Della, baby," I said, pushing back through the matted jungle toward the ship, "you guessed right about my eating some of the local lettuce. And if I hadn't done it, I wouldn't have had the strength to pull us out of this tough spot—"

She was staring at me queerly.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She brought her hand from her side. There was a scrap of khaki cloth in it.

She said, in a kind of hollow voice:

"This came off one of the plant men while I was struggling with him."

I took it and frowned at it. It bore embroidered black letters which said: **FIRST VENUSIAN EXPE.** It was part of a pocket. Realization washed over me slowly, and coldly.

"Those—those *things*," I said. "Those plant-men. Do you suppose they were—"

"Yes," said Della. "They were the men of the First Expedition here. But they're not men any more. They're plants. Some are completely changed; some are now true Venusians. Plants. Those with some animal left attacked us in a dumb, instinctive way."

"But how did they get that way? What made them turn into plants?"

Now she looked at me more queerly than ever. "On Venus, when you say 'you are what you eat', you really mean it."

I said, "Huh?"

She handed me her compact again. Still puzzled, I opened it and looked at myself. I didn't notice anything unusual right away. I saw my square-set, battered, not unpleasant mug and my dark brows; the break in my nose and the two little scars on my chin which I have been told give me a dashing, romantic effect—

And then I saw my ears.

My brows exploded upward. My eyes widened. I thrust my head forward, let my lower jaw hang, and stared, and stared, and stared into that mirror. I spoke, and my voice seemed to come from a million miles out in space.

"Well," I said, "I'm the guy who likes to be different . . ."

"Yes," said Della. She shuddered as she said it.

I tried tugging, but it was painful. The little green tendrils starting to grow out of my ears were there to stay . . .

●
IN CAVERNS BELOW, a full-length novel of subterranean adventure by Stanton A. Coblenz—**BEYOND THE STAR CURTAIN**, a novelet of the future by Garth Bentley—and many other outstanding stories in the Fall **FANTASTIC STORY QUARTERLY**—just out, 25c everywhere!

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 9)

off across incredibly wild and desolate country toward the lost Citadel, whose location has been revealed to him under the spell of the priests.

Pursuit is quick and relentless and there is always the possibility of treason among the fleeing conspirators, of frozen death over the dark rim of the world, of capture and slaughter at the hands of barbaric tribes.

In leading up to her tremendous climax Miss Brackett has given us one of her finest long stories—replete with all the magic of which she is such a complete master. **THE CITADEL OF LOST AGES** makes a grand lead for our December issue.

By way of something extremely special in the thought-provoking category we shall be offering **THE NEW REALITY**, a novelet by Charles L. Harness, whose **FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY**, a novel which ran last year in our companion magazine, **STARTLING STORIES**, is still being talked about in stf circles.

Mr. Harness, in a superb imaginative flight, takes us next issue into a near future where science and scientific logic pretty much control the world through a Bureau of Censors, headed by the amazing "E," but in a generally benevolent and enlightened way.

It is Prentiss, one of the Bureau's top trouble shooters, who discovers the incredible menace represented by Professor Luce and his experiments with the photon. This Lucean menace represents something new (to us, at any rate) in stf in both aim and method.

The aim is to reduce the entire universe to its elemental core—the method to shatter the entire pattern of man-made reality through the detonation of a single photon, which will have on the whole the effect of removal of a stone from an arch.

How Prentiss, abetted by E although hindered by the usually unimaginative Bureau, digs out the nature of the Lucean threat, how he discovers its ultimate meaning, the desperate steps he and E and others take to forestall its imminent execution, make this one of the finest suspense stories we have ever read in the field. It is also a story which will have most of you wondering a long time after it is finished—and surely this is one of the basic purposes of a magazine entitled **THRILLING WONDER STORIES**.

Cleve Cartmill, recently of the *Space Salvage* series in these pages, undertakes another trouble-ridden jaunt into the so-called ether in **CAPTAIN FAMINE**, our third December long story. It is, in fact, as true a space story as we have read—as much so as a fine sea story is of the sea.

In the saga of what is supposed to be the last voyage of the stout rescue-ship *Talisman*, he plumbs the curious and deep-seated affection which develops between veteran crewmen and the vessel they have come to regard and trust as their home.

Bolstered with strong human conflict and with space-mechanics envisioned with the reality of which Mr. Cartmill is such a master, **CAPTAIN FAMINE** takes the reader right out beyond the atmosphere where the sky is black and the million suns of the heavens blaze with uninking eyes. A great journey in a great ship.

As usual, although summer will of course be over, we shall have our shorts with us—and judging by recent purchases for inventory their level should be at least as high as in recent issues. And the usual trio of departmental features will be on hand with ye Ed officiating and mangling as usual.

With Brackett, Harness and Cartmill heading the lineup it looks mighty promising!

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

WE HAVE another one of those frantic missives with which to get the old tesseract rolling. This time it is—

LAY OFF—PLEASE!

by Robert Birnbaum

Dear Ed: STOP! I I I I I DON'T print that plea that was sent to you by (supposedly) me! I have just learned that my friend sent it as a practical joke. Every word about my health and my request is a lie!—209 Ford Street, Brooklyn 29, New York.

Always glad to oblige, Robert. However, your (supposedly) friend must have run more of a spoof than you figured. We never got the (supposedly) plea.

DOES ANYBODY CARE?

by Mrs. L. R. Foos

Dear Sir: What does it matter if the edges are trimmed or untrimmed? Does anybody really care if the pictures are good or bad? Is it important that a good many of us don't like lurid tens and bens on covers? How many of us really notice? I rather think that there are a good many others like me and my spouse who only care if the stories are good or bad. We read and read and often reread. We buy one and all as they appear on the stands and we, the

unwriting millions, realize that the editors buy the best they can get.—421 Spring Street, Walla Walla, Washington.

Mrs. Foos, we thank you in Bea Lillie fashion from the bottom (slap) of our heart (sigh). If you're right about those "millions" we're in clover.

FANTAFAN

by J. T. Oliver

Dear Editor: Your SUNDAY IS 3,000 YEARS AWAY took first place in the June issue, with COFFINS FOR MARS running second. Jones is a very good writer when he tries. I'm looking forward to Kuffner in the August ish. What's happened to him lately? Has he slowed up or just invented some new pen names?

I'd like very much to see TWS bring out a mag for new fantasy stories. SF is fine stuff but even the best of things needs a bit of variety to brighten it up. Seems that it would be a sound business venture.—712 32nd Street, Columbus, Georgia.

Thanks for comment on the June edition, J. T. As for your fantasy request it seems unlikely at present. But we are never averse to running a certain amount of fantasy in TWS and SS if we like it well enough. SUNDAY, for instance, in the aforementioned June issue, was basically a fantasy. As have been many others we have printed, including Norman Daniels' THE LADY IS A WITCH in SS a few months back. All we ask is a certain level of originality, credibility and entertainment value.

EN GARDE!

by Stanton V. Downs

Dear Sir: The recent remarks on fencing in literature made by your readers interest me greatly. I consider it unfortunate that they think sword play primitive. Indeed, fencing is the only truly scientific form of combat existing today.

I agree that fencing is impractical in the savage age we live in today—an age of lurking killers and death by remote control—but in the future, if men enlightened and high in culture find they MUST fight, they will do brilliantly and artistically in the infinitely intricate strategy of the sword.

If your readers will take note they will find that fencing is being added to the curriculum of many American high schools and is being recognized more and more as the ultimate sport—the only true exercise to utilize every faculty of a man simultaneously. No sport is as fast and as grueling as fencing. Beside it football and baseball look like checkers.

To compare fencing and combat by sharp-edged weapons to modern warfare is to compare chess with canasta.

Before I close I would like to say a word about that abominable mimic, Ray Bradbury, whose lesser works peep through your publication with flowing hair, flowing face and raven-on-shoulder.

I, like most people, see the cocaine-soaked classics of Edgar Allan Poe only in small doses. But to see the style of this master of the bizarre copied by Mr. Bradbury fills me with disgust. In the name of Science Fiction and good taste, I heartily wish you would turn him back where he belongs.—L'Ecole de Charme, 1290 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.

As an instructor of fencing, M. Downs, we respect your remarks anent the beauties and intricacies of sword play for what they are worth. And as a reader, M. Downs, we respect your comments on R.B. as expressing your own inviolable opinion.

We watched a good deal of fencing in the gymnasias of our school and college, however, and found it a sport (?) interminably

ridden by the umpire, who seemed invariably to step in and put a halt to the proceedings just when they showed some promise of a bit of action. It was reminiscent of on-the-level wrestling in spectator dullness.

Personally, we'll stick to Bradbury and the bazooka.

MORE SWORD PLAY

by Joe Gibson

Wonder Boy: Sho' hate to say this, I really do, and probably nobody will agree with me, but out of a generally poor issue (TWS-June, '50) it would seem that THE STRANGEST BEDFELLOWS rated tops. Also, it was the only story what's-his-name with the Nipponese tapestry style could really illustrate—who a Finlay would have been interesting.

Next, and I'm awfully sorry about this, comes MR. HIDING PLACE. And the only reason these two years stand out is that they hefted their bootstraps and kept going while the others stumbled around trying to find themselves.

On the other hand, SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILE-YEARS AWAY prompted me to spend a dime for a beer to cry into. Those poor, poor kids, George and Reba. Now, if Ray Jones will only lecture the story implied in that context please—SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY—I'll bet he'd have something! Consider the Einstein-Fitzgerald space-time implications of moving Sunday three thousand miles away—and keeping it there! Lessee, where'd I put that slide-rule.

And COFFINS TO MARS just wasn't agreeable. First, because the assumed space nostalgia made little sense. Next, because it was a claustrophobic unless you're on a scale case and waking up one morning on a battlefield in Europe or the South Pacific is too much akin to waking up on another planet—you sometimes think about being five, ten, fifteen thousand miles from home and how you're maybe hanging upside-down or at least sticking sideways from the home-town vertical. But it don't make you any more nutty than you already are.

Second, because rejuvenation of the aged isn't likely to work that way—and if it does, few people over eighty are likely to want it. The symptoms of senility in the hero and heroine indicate worn-out tissues, not tired minds, as anyone should realize with but a moment's reflection. Husky centenarians are much more inclined to be shrewd, cunning, and good executives.

The hypothesis seems much more in favor of youngsters taking to the outer worlds simply to get away from their old man—which might have been a lot better story, even from the old man's point of view. At any rate, the oldtimers are far more likely to run things in any immortal society. You gotta drop the "I" for the youngsters.

In The Reader Speaks, everybody seems to be chasing everybody else around with gleaming swords. Calm, calm, gentlemen! And ladies! Quiet down, now—this matter should be considered objectively! First, consider swords as a class. Now, the best sword you can handle is a stubby two-foot job with a strong, double-edged blade. Just long enough and heavy enough to pack a good hefty swing and ugly enough to do a good job, even through thick winter clothing. It's better than a knife because it fights sometimes in ways dangerous, wrangling and throwing knives is too unpredictable. And it's better than a spear because you can still use it in close quarters. For the same reason it's better than an axe.

But suppose everybody starts wearing chain-mail and breast-plates and other assorted junk? Then, my lads, you need a longer sword with a heavier blade and a better swag. And swing at the head, for if you miss you'll likely whack open a shoulder.

But suppose somebody starts using longbows and knocking off us armored gentlemen before we can get within swinging distance? Then, buckos, we must turn to stealth and creeping thru the wild wood and dashing forward on horseback and things they call tactics. And, since nobody wears junk any more, we can revert back to the lighter sword.

But wait! Some blighter has learned that one can parry the other's sword and counter-thrust! Mathinks this calls for a longer sword, but still light and easily managed. Rapiers make nice accoutrements for a gentleman's evening dress. And have you heard, the longbows are being replaced with mustangs? Verily, and what wouldst be think next?

And as it goes, But then, what's this? Pistols? Hand-weapons, you say—the name was strange. Pistols, it is! And—hark, what's this? Revolvers, bless me! Six charges to the cylinder. Ripping, wow! And that chap Gaffing has something or other. Ah, the sword is dead. How's the war going this morning? Have you heard, those American Marines fought thru the Argonne wood with fixed bayonets! Davis at Perry-

and thrust, the reports say! The Boches were terrified! Came out of the morning mists like silent Satans! But that Maxim really gave us something. And now, this Thompson.

For infiltration, there's nothing like a knife. The U. S. Rangers and British Commandos recommend it particularly for the surprise assault. The Commando with a knife is ten times deadlier than a man with an automatic rifle.

Barring long-range atomic warfare and going on to the planets, there's a handy little gadget for quick use against alien carnivores. Like an ordinary pistol with magazine clip in the handle but in place of bolt and recoil assembly and barrel tiny rocket projectiles are fed into a little tube running past the back of the right hand. Must be careful not to hold it in front of you because of the backblast. The tiny rockets have warheads pecked with powerful explosive. Naaf gadgets to whip from your holster when something big and awful comes charging down on you. Messy things at close quarters tho. Carry an ordinary pistol for that. Except in spacecraft, where slugs would ricochet around uncomfortably. You need something else to kill a man inside a spaceship.

Say, a good light sword that you can handle easily, yet ugly enough to do a good job.

Of course, it all depends. On whether you want to kill anyone in a spaceship, that is. Someone can probably think of a reason.

They usually do.

One other note of madness is your lambasting of Jake's gallery of "herocs"—tho I agree with you completely. But some poor lout is sure to upbraid you for cynically tearing down America's "great" legends. For that reason I think you should've attempted, at least, to name a few real heroes. Out of the Revolution we might pick that fellow who made history's first submarine attack on an enemy warship single-handed. Buffalo Bill was considered something of a show-off, which he was, but old Jim Bridger wasn't so bad a head. Sitting Bull was a mad-batter alongside Crazy Horse. If I recall—it's been so long, you see—but along about that same time a young feller name of Wyatt Earp had a sure-fire way of hunting buffalo.

Later, his gun talent could've made him a deadly killer if he'd been as hotheaded as, say, Wild Bill Hickok, but he was pretty much of a solid citizen. Used that talent sparingly, even against trigger-happy pygmy gunmen. He'd walk up behind 'em, back in Dodge, silent and catlike, bash 'em over the head with a signal that had a 12-inch barrel, dislodge 'em and drag 'em off to jail.

Nothing much really happened around Dodge City, Abilene, Sante Fe and the Comstock Lode, which Jake mentions, except a few hombrags got killed. But take places like Fort Pitt, now, or later St. Joe and Independence, or earlier Tasc, Mexico City and Montreal, the trappers' route or Seattle when Russia had Alaska or 'Frisco after the Gold Rush or Kansas City and Chicago during the Gay Nineties. Or old New Orleans during Lafitte's day, when every night was a Mardi Gras, or Little Old New York when show biz was vaudeville.

Hmm? Why don't you youngsters take a running jump for Mars!—24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.

As usual, Joe, you've got us sweating hemoglobin. We first take issue with your bleat anent Ray Gallun's COFFINS FOR MARS. You didn't like the story—okay, that's your business, or should we say lamentable lack of taste. *Chacun à son goût*, we always say after carefully wrapping our big toe in flannel and resting it on a hassock or some other form of Russian horseman.

You remark that "rejuvenation of the aged isn't likely to work that way"—thereby assailing a basic tenet of stf. Maybe it isn't likely to work that way—or maybe it isn't likely to work any way—but the author has suggested that it has and built a pretty credible yarn upon it. He could probably have used fifty other methods and done the same but this is the one he wished to try and it was all right with us.

And what's this about "dashing forward on horseback and things they call tactics"? Did you ever dash forth on a tactic?

Joe, we're surprised!

As for the submarine inventor, Broth-er Bushnell was not exactly a hero in the epic sense. He was that American phenomenon, a gadgeteer so hepped up about proving the worth of his gadget that we suspect he gave little thought to the risks he was running when he bobbed about under the surface of New York harbor in his fruitless attempt to sink H.M.S. Eagle off Governor's Island by attaching a torpedo to her hull via a worm-screw.

We have an amusing Jim Bridger story due in a soon-to-appear issue of TWS or SS (it may have seen print by this time) and as for Wyatt Earp, there are several schools of thought lying around as to just how solid a citizen he was. And we do mean "lying" around. You can have your old Crazy Horse—we heard confidentially that he almost never took a bath.

See you on Mars—you and Ray B.

STRAIGHT TO YE OLDE POINT by Perdita Lilly

Dear Ed: To come straight to ye olde point, my motive for writing this letter is quite frankly to take advantage of your benevolent good nature and the circulation of your magazines to make a plea to the public which is strictly for my own benefit.

My plea is this: is there somewhere in fandom another femme fan who desperately wants to go to the Norwescon but whose finances are not only scanty but hard to come by? If so, would that femme fan care to share hotel expenses with another fanne in the same situation? I am 18 years old, five feet six inches tall, have brown hair and eyes, promise to keep my somewhat uneven temperament as sweet as possible—and I have never been in jail or away from home.

If you're interested, write to me. If I get more than one or two replies I'll refer you to one of the other surplus gals who answer. In fact, I'll be glad to set up a sort of temporary bureau for the purpose of helping fans find share-the-expense transportation and roommates if anyone would care to have me do it.

Well, thanks a million, Ed, for letting me take up your valuable time and space. Sometime, when I'm in a more constructive mood, I'll be glad to present my lavaluable opinions of your incomparable magazines.—14169 Monta Vista, Detroit, Michigan.

We hope you have time to make connections as the result of this letter's appearance, Perdita. It just missed getting in under the wire for our last issue, but there is still roughly a month's grace.

In case anyone doesn't know, this year's World Science Fiction Convention, the NORWESCON, will take place over Labor Day week end in Portland, Oregon, and promises to be an exciting and well-managed affair. For information, write Donald B. Day, Norwescon Chairman, at Box No. 8517, Portland 7, Oregon. For information and Norwescon membership, enclose a dollar with your letter.

This will be the last call for the Norwescon, so better get aboard now.

FROM AN IRISH AFRICAN by B. O'Gorman

Dear Ed: Hope I don't bungle but this is my first letter to an sf mag even though I have been reading them (when I could get them) since I was 12 years young (20 years ago). I went your readers, if they would be so generous, to pass on to me ANY sf mags they can spare, when they have done with them. Because we have Currency & Import control I cannot buy them here now or send you any money for them. But if any of your readers are interested in South African stamps or snaps or even mags, I shall be glad to send them in exchange. I promise too to answer all letters I may receive as promptly as I can.

And now let me say how much I enjoyed THE LURE OF POLARIS, COLD WAR, BACKWARD O TIME, THE OTHER WORLD, KING OF THIEVES and of course THE ULTIMATE CATALYST. These were in the October and November (1949) issues of TWS and SS, which are the latest we've had here.—12 Ella Street, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Ella Street, eh? Sounds as if someone had cut the "D" out of Perry Mason's ever-faithful secretary. All the same we hope you get the results you hope for from the appearance of your letter in the above space, Paddy.

SHADRACK by Shelby Vick

Dear Ab—Start for Abednego. Still sticking to Biblical names. Will find an appropriate one for you eventually. And it won't be Editorial I can't personally see any reason for you to hide your name. I can think of one mag that I would understand if the editor hid behind anonymity—and he doesn't! If he's so brave, why not you?

There was certainly nothing in the June issue to be ashamed of, unless it was the cover, but you must be used to Berger by now. I do wish you would get more Lawrence and Finley (and I like Astaire) but the quality of the stories—well, there is only one I have much of a gripe about—COFFINS TO MARS. Rey should know better.

Stories about old people don't generally go good in a mag slanted to middle-age and below (way below, I might add). The end of it was good but it started off cheap. The characters weren't convincing. Everything seemed to happen too conveniently.

SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY smacked of the trilogy you recently published by Jones. Meaning it was good.

NO HIDING PLACE: Nat NOI Cleveland my boy, how could you please say it isn't Joe Jaks, come back! Don't leave us now! But (sob) I fear there is no rescuing him. The indications point too surely towards (shudder) marriage. And what is generally called the Happy Ending. Oh, well—I'll probably like anything else that Cleve turns out. And you just refused to keep the same artist on the series. But I did see I like Carroll. . . He was the hero, wasn't he?

THE PILLOWS should be put in bed with Goss & Dick. Or maybe they have—I haven't heard of those two for some time. Good! (So, by the way, was the story THE PILLOWS.)

THE STRANGEST BIBBLOWES comes next. Interesting. PRECOGNITION was one of those stories with no physical action that are highly pleasing psychologically.

THE REVERSED MAN was a theme that I have read before. Clarke did much better with "Against the Fall of Night." Of course, I can't expect him to turn out a masterpiece every day or three. Just once every two months.

Which brings us to the phenomenon of a Speaking Reader who never makes a sound—words, Nardine, Brodley, etc. My two cents' worth—there is a feeling of romanticism about a word which you can't quite capture in a bulky intricate ray pistol. Maybe it does sound incantatory, words & the future, but lots of readers seem to like it.

Remember what Einstein said—"I don't know what the next war will be fought with but this one after that will be fought with clubs. That's not verbatim but you get the gist. Why do you work up to words after that? You feed into the background a record, far proper atmosphere. The song: "Dream." Now was come to Sgt. Bernie's letter. It's a wonderful idea. Serge, Jim Herman was the guy who wrote the letter that inspired you by the way. He mentioned one good objection to sf-en trying to start such a project. The immediate reaction of anyone approached would be, "You read science fiction, huh? Another of these dreamers. Sorry, I want to put my money into reality." Try and convince them of the reality of a rocket to the moon. Just try.

Seems no one has mentioned that the movie *Destination Moon* is working on. *DESTINATION MOON*, is to be in Technicolor, and one reviewer said that it "might well be the surprise

picture of 1950." There are no Name stars in it, but it seems to me that might be fitting.

Few of the Name stars could fit into a role in sf, unless it was written for them, seems to me. Let's not a new crop grow up and develop for sf alone. Watchthink? (You do, don't you?) Do you realize that I haven't posted you with a poem or even an attempt at same for what seems like ages? Well, I shall exert my will power and refrain once more. You lucky thing, you.—Box 493, Lynn Haven, Fla.

Very well, Shel, in view of your objections to name stars in sf movies—and in view of the recent *Rocketship X-M* and *Operation Moon*, let's take time out to cast a space plot or two with established favorites of the cinema. We might even take the current (August) issue for plots.

We begin with Henry Kuttner's AS YOU WERE, our lead story. If you haven't yet read it it concerns a great (and greatly phony) author's harried nephew-secretary, who wants to marry a movie star but can't because his uncle has fouled up the deal. There is an absent-minded European scientist involved as well as a stone frog, a chief of police and some trans-dimensional sight-seers who inadvertently get the time-schedule all balled up.

For the nephew we might select Ray Milland (and then again we might not), for the vicious author-uncle Clifton Webb or Jane Powell, for the scientist Jean Hersholt or Albert Dekker. Francis could be the chief of police and, of course, Margjorie Main the glamour gal, with the Ritz brothers playing the alien travelers (surely they look alien enough and anyway they never appear in the picture).

Having begun with this one, let's end it right here. But the possibilities are infinite. You've really got to step to count out Holly-wood, yes indeed, Mr. De Mille.

YOU CERTAINLY MAY by Lin Carter

Cherio: May I say that I was rather favorably impressed with your June issue? Far be it from me to—Heaven forbid—but as an editor up just to get a letter printed, but I really must say I liked this ish. First there was the cover. Now if I may make an understatement, Bergey is not my favorite cover artist. But I rather liked this one, not so garish and bright as usual, in fact quite good.

Raymond Jones is one author I'm not familiar with. I've seen his by-line before and probably read plenty of Jones-isms but can't offhand come up with any outstanding yarn. Well SUNDAY was pretty darn good. Rather along the same lines as C. L. Moore's VINTAGE SEASON. The method of time-travel seemed reasonably unique and the characters were unusually well-handled. Pretty good yarn and an intriguing title by the way.

COFFIN TO MARS was probably the best story in the issue. Well-handled mood and a fine tight plot helped it considerably. I'd like to see some more along this line. The handling of the aged in this piece, reminded me of the authentic—the "Sixty"—in Isaac Asimov's recent novel "Pebble in the Sky."

The latest in the Space Salvage series was somewhat superior to the more recent ones tho I am beginning to get a wee bit tired of the same characters in the same positions, yarn after yarn. I see you've had Orben blast the three or four stories in this ish—may one ask what's happened to Finley and Lawrence/Stevens? Your interior art seems your weakest point at the moment. For gosh sakes do something about it.

Arthur C. Clarke is really one of the best of the newer

crop of writers. His REVERSED MAN reminded me of van Vogt strongly. The idea of Nelson starving because he was unable to eat the reversed-molecule proteins was a VERY clever twist, startlingly clever. You really ought to cultivate this boy, he's going places.

The rest of the stories were mediocre with some good bits by Napoli, who is evolving a style very much like the great Aubrey Beardsley. Best news in zoons is the Return of Hankultner in the next issue! Hope it's another bang-up science-fantasy for a change. Kuff hasn't given us a really good one since THE TIME AXIS.

While on the subject of stories coming up, when—WHEN—WHEN do we get a yarn by Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett? I bet surely, now that they're married, they'd turn out a law collaboration. The blending of their two distinctive and high-quality talents should really be sumthin'!! I'm still hoping.

Got quite a kick out of Astro Bradley's Hamlet-a-la-stet Soliloquy! You will notice, he sez with feverish glints in his little red eyes, that I have for the last four or five letters, managed to restrain myself in regard to poetry. Be warned! I shan't be able to hold 'ar in for long. And when she comes, she's coming like those things by Shelby Vick . . . a-la-Archy. So be warned!—1734 Newark St. So., St. Petersburg, Florida.

What are these poetic shackles or crackles or whatever you lads have donned of late to gyve your jive? Better shed them one of these days—ye Edde has had little rhythmic, to say nothing of diarthmic, to tear his purpling hair over of late.

So you want the Brack and the Ham to collaborate, Lin—well, once again we feel impelled to disinter the oldie about the time Isadora Duncan wrote George Bernard Shaw, suggesting they get together for the purpose of providing the world with a eugenic offspring which would "combine your brains and my beauty."

And once again we disinter G.B.S.'s reply, to wit—"But, Miss Duncan, suppose it combined my beauty and your brains?"

Better leave well enough alone since both seem to be producing well independently of late.

VALE

by Bob Farnham

Dear Editor: This is one of the hardest letters I have ever had to write.

After reading the June issue of THRILLING WONDER STORIES but this time I shall not comment, for it is probably the last one I shall ever be able to buy. I lost my job that I've had for the past twenty-five years, and have been forced out of service on my disability pension.

My income has stopped and it will be at least three months before I'll have my first pension check, and at \$70 a month for two people, it will not permit such luxuries as "out" two magazines. Fortunately, a group of unknown fans have come to my aid and I am able to retain active membership in the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Otherwise I should have to drop out of fandom entirely.

I do not mind going on my pension but I have held hopes of selling a story and to realize that I must drop such efforts leaves a rather bitter taste in my mouth, especially after receiving an encouraging note with the usual rejection slip.

Supplies and stamps cost \$\$\$—these I do not have, so I guess that this letter is a sort of good-bye note. Even my ribbon is going out. Oh well—I guess that is life.

After having made many friends in Fandom it is hard to say good-bye, but if those of my Fan Friends who read this letter do not hear from me again, they will know why. So Long, Fella, and carry on with the good work you are doing. I've had to drop mine, and right in the middle of the most serious effort yet!—104 Mountain View Drive, Dalton, Georgia.

This is just about as tough to answer as it was for you to write. But, Bob, we have a

hunch you'll find you have a lot more friends than you think—especially knowing sfandom. As for your stories—write them anyway. And when you think any one of them is good enough take a gamble on postage.

We have another hunch that you'll be receiving a few stamps from this clinic we call our readers. And we can promise you the most constructive criticism possible if you choose to send your creative outpourings our way—and a prayer from us that we shall be able to send you further stamp money in the form of a story check. Stay with it.

As for you, readers, please see to it that he does.

CANADIAN CAPER

by Bill Morse

Sir: You let me down with a bang this month. No Finlay and no Bradbury. That lowers your Hooper rating considerably.

Raymond F. Jones, I see, clings to his favorite thesis—never underestimate the power of a woman (I won't). The thought of being married to a female genius gives me cold shivers. It would feel worse if, as in the handsome hero's case, I knew she considered me a savage. Good story, though.

THE REVERSED MAN had a good idea which would have come off better in a novella or a full length job. As it was I had a feeling of anticlimax.

NO HIDING PLACE—for once I enjoyed the Space Salvage stuff. It must have been the black and hairy boys. They'd make nice pets around the house. Jake should have kept a couple to tame Helen with.

COFFINS FOR MARS—hmmmm! Imagine a thousand years of married life! I should live so long! Gallun put his tale over very well.

PRECOGNITION—I like.

STRANGEST BEDFELLOWS—the artist (Napoli?) caught the weird and wonderful description of the Lathenst. I hate to think that politicking will be unchanged so far in the future, but it made a good gimmick to bring about the happy ending.

THE PILLOWS—yes, sir! An all too human ending in the best tradition of the prophet without honor in his own country.

OK the whole an average issue. Nothing outstandingly good and nothing to complain of except the omissions already stated.

TRS—how those people hate to admit that Bradbury is in the right! Ray is neither bitter nor morbid nor perverted. He is more a modern Cassandra than a Juvenal and he hits the nail every time. Despite Calvin Beck's petulant attempt to blame the governments for the sins of the people, Man is responsible for his own brevity.

Sorry if I don't express myself well. Gwen Cunningham said all there was to say about PAYMENT IN FULL and that tale is all Bradbury.

Finally (and about time too) your reply to me. Cad? Could be. I'd rather have a Dancing Girl of Ganymede—W. E. E. (RAF Signals) RCAF, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

We agree about the Bradburyarn in question, Bill. Also about the Dancing Gal. But what steams us up about your epistle is your opinion of an "average issue." Zounds, man, what do you do for adjectives when we come up with something special (or rather when our alleged authors do)?

SIGN OF THE RAMSAY

by R. H. Ramsay

Dear Editor: I read the entire contents of the June TWS without being inspired to write a letter, until I came to the Reader Service section. I never heard of Lee Hickling before but I hope to again. In his letter he said something that has needed saying for some time.

I don't like Bradbury either. At one time I did to a

limited extent but I don't say more. Less on account of his hatred of humanity, however, than for his morbidity. A good deal is said of Bradbury's "powers of imagination." Actually his imagination is extremely limited, not to be compared with the free-wheeling concepts of Theodore Sturgeon for example. Bradbury has only one theme—death—and preferably some unnatural or unhealthy aspect thereof. He does possess a certain ingenuity in inventing variations on this theme, but when he tries to handle a subject not directly abutting on the graveyard, he writes like a hack.

Consider his choice of locales. Merit, notoriously a dead world. And his well-known stories about Mexico, which he characterizes as a land of death (tho to a sociologist Mexico is a country which has progressed farther in the past twenty years than any other in the western hemisphere).

The fact that certain well-placed persons outside of the pulp field also admire Bradbury is not particularly significant. At present there is an unfortunate fad for that type of literature—the death obsession, scorn for humanity, contempt for the strivings of mankind, acceptance of doom with a pretense of philosophic enthusiasm. And this at a time when man's supreme efforts are needed for his own survival. It is not hard to find a certain commentary on the state of what we call our society in this trend.

Bradbury does have an enviable power of language but to give this as a reason for his popularity rings as false as the statement of a high-school student I once knew, who justified his choice of the Rubaiyat as his favorite poem by saying, "I like Omar's style." Mr. Hickling says, "I am quite unable to account for the worship Bradbury receives from the average reader." I can account for it. The pose of cynical misanthropy and voluptuous morbidity is a prominent feature of adolescent romanticism; and despite all recent expiations of the popularity of science fiction, the "average" reader at all pangs is adolescent.

I think that as time goes on an increasing number of fans will come to agree with me—for the reason that I believe the normal man has a natural preference for life over death, sunshine over gloom, health over disease. There will always be some kids coming to discover Bradbury with sighs of ecstasy—and undoubtedly a small core of pure-cut cultists, the kind who go into raptures over Ivy Compton-Burnett, and of "ifusionless" thinkers of the sort who believe that George Orwell has an important message, will remain true to Bradbury, but the bulk of readers, I am certain, will eventually outgrow him. The fact that few have, so far, is not important in view of the fact that the Bradbury cult is only about five years old.—Box 1721, Fargo, N. D.

It is our hunch, R.H., that you are speaking with a voice filtered by your fears. Disregarding the nuisance of taxes, the only certainty, once we achieve being spanked on our little blue bottoms by mid-wife or obstetrician, is death. This is a fact which most of us do our damndest to forget in the interim, which reverse obsession is generally one of our greatest follies.

We have, in the course of our forty years, seen a number of persons die—both in and out of bed. It used to scare h—ll out of us.

But after a lunch session at the Players too long ago with Don Marquis and Irv Cobb (neither of whom could be called exactly morbid) we decided that if they were having such fun with the subject we might as well forget our carefully built-in tabu and get into the act.

Don asked Irv to tell us the story about the Kentucky German family with the suicide habit and it was strictly hysterical. Not to mention gruesome. Being about twenty-three at the time and respecting our elders, we decided they were healthy about it all and went along with them.

Bradbury is no necrophile. He is, on the contrary, a gay good-humored individual who is very nice to have around the house (although, with apologies to Bill Morse,

we'd rather have Dinah). After all, interest in death is as normal as anything else in life. It is certainly the basis, alas, of most religions.

Not talking about it is as absurd as the long-dead Volstead Act. And if you can talk about it—well, why not? It is nothing to fear. A mere thought of the billions of errant cowards who have succeeded in dying removes panic. It is far better and saner to get a little fun out of the fact and the idea.

BUM STEERS by Bob Hoskins

Dear Ed.: SUNDAY IS 3,000 YEARS AWAY didn't quite live up to my expectations but it is good for Jones. I haven't finished the whole ish yet but so far I prefer *IN HIDING*. Is either SS or TWS recently you said that Hank Kuttner ain't Cleve Cartmill. If he ain't, somebody is going around giving a lot of fat bum steers. And if he ain't that means that Hank isn't in this ish of TWS at all. What's the mag coming too?

Remember the good ole days when Hank would quite often have three stories in an ish? And don't say it isn't so! I know of at least two instances. Too lazy to dig the mags out of my closet, tho.

Clarke ought to stick to the stories of the far future. I didn't like the *REVERSED MAN* at all. At the time I am trying to decide just how bad it actually was. When is he going to do something more on the line of *AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT*? If he tried hard he oughta be able to work out a novel-length sequel to *AT-ON*.

Recently I had the misfortune to become the owner of a copy of Volume I, Number 1 *CAPITAN FUTURE*. I can't read the d—n thing. Will just save it for my collection. Hamilton sure has improved his style in the new *Cap Future* novelets. Incidentally, are you only going to have one of these every other ish of SS? You oughta have one in each ish of both SS and TWS.

This ish of TWS marks sorta anniversary for me. It was exactly a year ago that I picked up my first ish of *THRILLING-WONDER STORIES*, companion to SS, and featuring a Brackett tale. Since then I have got several of the best ishies for recent years. You sure has improved, boy.

I think it may be possible to print the rest of the *Pete Manx* series in the two new mags? If you had one in each ish of both it would give us five a year. Shouldn't take too long to clean up the series in that way.

I'll be glad when the second ish of the quarterly rolls around. Recently got the January 1934 *WONDER STORIES* with Part I of Vaughan's *EXILE OF THE SKIES*. Seems like a wonderful story.

Once again I want to repeat my request for pen-pals. By the time this letter appears (if it appears) I'll be 17.—Lyons Falls, New York.

We wish Clarke would come up with another novel—and how we do! Unfortunately he is a pretty busy little bee on the other side of the pond at present—he is quite the white-haired lad among certain British scientific groups and deservedly so, to say nothing of playing an extremely active role in the highly erudite British Interplanetary Society.

We'll run acceptable CF novelets as often as the maestro turns them out. As for *Pete Manx*—he should ultimately turn up in one of our new reprint magazines.

Utterly unapropos aside to Betsy Curtis, whose fanzine *THE CRICKET* arrived and was perused at this point—*avec plaisir*. You need a book for university study? Why not *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS* or Norman Douglas' *SOUTH WIND*? Both British, 'tis true, but both very fine.

COMPULSION COMMENT

by Ed Cox

Dear Editor: A few comments on the June TWS. I really must say you are in for a letter a month from yours truly, the Lubec Leprechaun.

Well, I must say that the June TWS V3n2 was a bit below par. Not especially in the story-quality, but in life, fire, zest, spice, etc. In other words, it was doid, man, DAID! Now SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY was a fine story. Very, very good. But placid. I LIKE Ray Jonas' stories. I might even say that I admire his writing ability. But no pep. Not that a story like this needs pep. So let's continue down the contents page.

And we come to NO HIDING PLACE. A yarn that I liked very much. In fact it had more life to it than most of the rest. Correction—it DID have more than any other or all the rest together. A fitting climax to the series I might say. I enjoyed this story and series very much. I hope Carlmill will continue to produce such entertaining fare.

Then we have a very significant story in the returned master, Ray Gallus' COFFINS TO MARKS. It was a drab story, however. But then, maybe it was supposed to be. To emphasize the lost hope, after lack of the will to live by the "doomed" colonists, it turned out as I suspected though. I guess nearly seven years of intensive sf reading has taught me too many signs, clues, etc., in the plot-development of the stories and authors. But, to the story again, I will say that COFFINS was very worth while. I hope to see more like it. Down in the short stories dept. I fear that I must say (altho I hate to) that Clarke's story was way below par for him. The idea was nice, ending effective but... Maybe it was the handling. I dunno. It just missed fire with this reader.

Newcomer Mack Reynolds' story was—well—it read good, the writing was capable. No definite comment I guess.

William Morrison's story was—awful! The neat trick is it was good, but this story goes to show just how badly an author CAN tell down when trying to write about the psychology of alien races.

THE PILLOWS was another one on that old theme. From the Speer Decimal Classification, this would be about 34.1. That old one where an alien creature, parasitic in nature usually, takes subtle control over unsuspecting Man. Everyone's tired. Even Bradbury. He didn't do bad either. But St. Clair didn't do too well. Could've though.

All in all no story in this issue really had pulsing life to it, with vivid paintings of alien scenes, exotic and strange, with atmosphere oozing off the printed page. Like Brackett can do. Like so many of the old authors could do. So—WHERE'S BRACKETT? ? ? And her hubby as well. Hamilton can really create an alien scene and atmosphere. Glori! He'll be in the next issue! Hoooorraaaaay! And our "William Morrison" can too, as witness his CF stories in the last issues of that long-doid mag.

I'm really very pleased to see you using the work of Paul Orban so much lately. Somehow, he's always been my old standby fave. He's been in frustrating since the early '30's and his pics always give you the impression that something's going on. Read the story! Find out! I liked especially his pic for Carlmill's yarn. And Napoli! Oh, come now, how can you do this to us? It was horrible. Who did the pic for Reynolds' and St. Clair's stories? A revitalized Napoli? Guess that is all. See you in SS and FSQ.—4 Spring St., Lubec, Me.

You'll be getting Brackett and lots of her in an SS novel sometime around the first of the year. The story is in and it's a dilly. As

for Hamilton, how much do you want? What with his Cap Future novelets and his recent novel, THE CITY AT WORLD'S END in the same magazine, he's giving us quite a lot. And there was Leigh's swell novelet, THE TRUANTS, in the same issue.

Hey, come to think of it the Hamiltons are appearing exclusively in our companion mag of late. Have to do something about that. TWS is suffering from their loss. As for those illos, the St. Clair one was Napoli as guessed, but the Reynolds job was a Peter Poulton.

READERCHAT

by Emil A. Thompson

My Dear Editor: Scanning the readers' division of the TWS June '50 issue, I'm impressed by the statement that some of the readers are "going mad," namely de Weeste & Calvin Beck. Do they go "wild, simply wild" over Thrilling Wonder or what? Uncle Remus goes mildly wild because we as yet have no space transit. He wants to soar into the wide open interstellar spaces in a cute little rocket, bound for Venus. Don't worry, Uncle, some day, when the A or H-bombs make the earth too hot for us, we will build plenty of rocketships to escape—hope it won't be too late. . . .

The Bonestell scenes in "Mr. Smith Goes to Venus" were dated 500 yrs. from now. Much has happened in 5 centuries both here—and on Venus. Five centuries ago Columbus hadn't as yet discovered America and where now New York's skyscrapers raise their proud towers against the sky the isle of Manhattan stood virgin and primeval, untouched by civilization. Who can tell how it will look 500 yrs. from now.

Meanwhile we must be content by doing our time-machine and space travel via S-F and our imagination. If has the benefit of not being as dangerous as the actual time or space travel.

I agree fully with Marlon Zimmer, that it is a pity that Shakespears could not have lived in our str-fraught 20th century. He was somewhat of a fantasy writer himself; what tragedies and oh what comedies he could have written; and how the critics would have enjoyed penning him.

"Coffee to Mars" seems to me the best in this issue. But all the novelets and shorts are good.

With the best to you and TWS I hope to remain cordially and sincerely yours.—3963 N. E. 9th Ave., Portland 12, Ore.

Your yen for Shakespeare reminds us a little of Bradbury's yen for Thomas Wolfe's resurrection in the future—in a story which appeared in a rival magazine. However, fortunately or otherwise, each era has to get by with the authors it can produce—and this one, like those that lie ahead, has its full share of powerful word-builders.

Unfortunately, it is seldom easy to pick out the truly fine writers during their lifetimes. Issues and authors that seem important at the moment have a way of shifting with the perspective of the future. For instance, while Will Shakespeare was recognized as one of the competent dramatists during the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods in England, his true greatness as a poet-playwright was not generally realized until a century and a half or more after his death.

Men like Marlowe and Greene and Peele and Lily and Ben Jonson among his contemporaries attracted as much or more attention. Then, of course, came the Restoration titans, men like Congreve and Dryden and



Wycherley, to be followed by the Eighteenth Century dramatists—Sheridan, Horace Walpole and—yes, John Burgoyne, who had a near-Noel Cowardish vogue.

It was during the dearth of first-class playwrights that followed the above and was ended only with the rise of George Bernard Shaw, Pinero and others in the latter part of the last century that Shakespeare, seen in full perspective, really came into his own.

With the comparatively recent development of the novel as a staple of English literature, the stress has to some extent shifted from the drama—although the growth not only of the movies but of television is currently threatening to make dramatic writing again preeminent. And more able and talented writers than ever before are playing their trade.

Who will emerge as our own titans?—we'll have to wait and see.

TWO IN ONE by Dick Ryan

Dear Ed: Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more!" . . . Bergey heth murder'd sleep and therefore the fen shall sleep no more; Ya Ed shall sleep no more. . .

Please do not construe the above as another shot in the never-ending cover war. I got so tickled at Marion Bradley's parody that I thought I'd try one. As a matter of fact, the covers for May and June are the best in a year—for Bergey, that is.

I fully intended to write a long epistle, glowing with adjectives, on that wonderful May STARTLING. But I never got around to it, so this will have to do for two issues.

WINE OF THE DREAMERS. Now, I've been a fan for only the last twelvemonth and my reading experience has been limited accordingly. But I really mean it when I say that this is the BEST book-lengthier I have read. It even baffles Leinster's THE OTHER WORLD, also an alien-forces novel, which I had considered tops up to now.

SIGNBOARD OF SPACE. Again I am speechless. (Well, almost.) You know, you can overwork adjectives up to the point where they are meaningless. That's what would happen if I tried to praise this one as it should be praised. SIGNBOARD after eleven years is still as new and thrilling as tomorrow. That's a million for printing it.

CHILDREN OF THE SUN. Wall. In another issue this could be number one. When you get the good ones you really pack 'em in, don't you? I've always opposed space-fantasy, as this definitely is. But there is something about this story . . . must be the cosmic (only word I can think of) manner in which it is written. Anyway, I am a Captain Future convert as of last month.

THE BLACK EWE. Very good. A touch of the occult is always nice, just so you don't overdo it. SUMMER WEAR. Again, very good. L. Sprague de Camp is one of s-f's best humor-dispensers. THE HISTORIAN. Little more than a filler, still it pays its way.

Now, if you're still with me, on to June and TWSI SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND YEARS AWAY was great. When it comes to blending pseudo-science with the human element, Raymond F. Jones can't be beaten. I'm willing to bet that he's an engineer or technician of sorts himself. A very talented fellow, Mr. Jones.

COFFINS TO MARS. This one surprised me. I didn't think I was going to like it but it sort of grows on you. The sand-wrenching disorientation experienced by the old people seems to me to be an extraordinary use of a dread of new places which has come down through the years. The unknown is always terrifying, whether it be an uncrossed ocean or an unexplored planet. Happily, there are always men and women willing to brave the unknown. This story was credible, and I liked it.

As for the shorts, they were all above average. As for the final chapter in the Sprague de Camp series (it is, I trust, the final?), the best said, the better. Can this be the same Cartmill who wrote BELLS ON HIS TOES and NUMBER NINE? Come on, Cleve, we know you're better than this.

That, for Pete's sake, is enough story comment for two letters. I like to read it but I don't care so much for writing it. Sifting through the letter sections is a long, though enjoyable, task. While we're on the subject of departments, your always-adult editorial is an appreciated feature. It's never too long and always good.

In conclusion, friend(s) (and anyone who has read this far is my bosom buddy), I apologize for turning this letter into a catalogue of story ratings, and promise to do better next time. By the way—J. P. Conlon's letter from my home town gives me new hope that there may be other lovers of sif in these parts. If such exist and are interested in forming a fan club I'd like to hear from them. Just drop me a line.—224 Broad Street, Newark, Ohio.

Well, we hope we can keep it up in your opinion, Dick. And luck with fancontacts around Newark, Ohio. Incidentally, Gallun's COFFINS seems to have stirred up some rather eerie fan reactions.

Will someone please tell us why stf should concern itself only with the sensations of the very young? Or why the very young should find it difficult to read about folk more mature than themselves? It gives us to think and comment anent same will be appreciated.

After all, one of the supposedly fine things about fandom is that it is limited in no way to any one age, sex, caste or color.

METER SCHMETER by David Van Jenrette

Dear editor: the cover was horribly tinted with colors red, gray, and green, but to make sure this letter gets printed I'll say you have a wonderful magazine.

Please don't say my rhymes are poor and they don't have so meter or else I'll get terrifically mad and drop you with my repenter!

Orban's art is fine but for Finley I do plneat
Will he soon return?

Astairite isn't jolly and methinks 'tis folly .
And all his illos you should burn.

The stories were all fairly good and that is as it should be to infinity.
but I feel very sure that this will not endure perpetually with much continuity.

I haven't any bones
with the works of Gallun, Clarke, Morrison and Jones,
but I rate as only fair
stories by Reynolds, Cermitt and St. Clair.

Solar Salvage
is garbage.

Sunday is 3000 years away:
I hope it doesn't stay that way!

Now I must recite to you
a tale of mystic Shanadu
that city dead so long, so long.
It lies far in other lands,
dreaming 'neath the desert's sands
victim of a sorcerer's wrongs.

If you care to see the rest of the tale
Contact Bob Eisney without fail.
And those other Burroughs morons
named Hammond and McNaughton
have conspired through the mail.

So if you find within your walls
a fan-zine disgusting, old, and stale
I will tell you what to do:
Tear it in a dozen places
And rub it in the moldy faces
of those guys who dream of Shanadel

But I am wondering from my letter
Back to it I sure better

get.
Or I greatly fear

in your mag I won't appear yet.

Hey, guys! Do you realize the facts?
re fendom are you dumb?
Relax!
Write to Hammond, Dave,
that guy who doth rave
about the works of a certain writer.
(Though why he loves him so
is something I don't know
for that guy is an awful blighter!)

Hammond knows, according to report,
The whos, and whats, and wherefore
of fendom, but really sport
what do you care for
such information.

Agitation!
That time

I didn't rhyme.

"Orange" I can make a word rhyme,
This is honest, editor, but you can't do this feat.
Right now I have not the time
And so, like the rest of this letter, I'll delete—
Unless someone cares to hear it next time!
HMMMMM!
HMMMMM!
—Box 49, Runnemed, New Jersey.

*We distrust those who capit'lize
Their "vans" or "vons" or "de"s—
Or likewise with their "à"s and zu"s
It never should have was.*

*But none the less we'll this forgive
As innocent pretense
But can we let such "verse" to live
Without a jot of sense?*

On the whole, Runnemed, we think not.

OKAY, WE SAW IT TOO by Herbert A. Kushner

Dear Editor: Your typesetters seem to have mastered that which the best of our modern scientists dare not even consider, realizing that it is beyond human power at this time. The neat little trick to which I refer is the miraculous ability to change temporal distance to that of space. Plainly: YEARS to MILES on the contents page. When will the long list of TWS wonders cease?

"Hay, bub," says Kushner, rolling up his sleeves and flexing his mighty (?) muscles, "since when is Heinlein a blade addict?" From what I have read of Robert H's work I get the impression of a particularly well-balanced S-F author. Notice the emphasis on S-F. Hardly, if ever, does the sword—last stand of the nostalgic (Def.—A pain in the back) fantasy author—find its way into good S-F. I cite Hermes as the only exception.

This month's stories clearly resolve themselves into clearly defined order.

1. "The Pillows"—St. Clair. This story happened to hit the right psychological spot at the right time.
2. "No Hiding Place"—Cartmill missed the first four in this series. This one, however, clicked.
3. "The Strangest Bedfellow"—Morrison, mediocre story.
4. "Coffins to Mars"—Gallen (yawn).
5. "Pracognition"—Reynolds, "The Reversed Man"—Clarke, and "Sunday Is Three Thousand Years Away"—Jones, are equally poor.

TR5 was unusually interesting this time. You've got a wonderful bunch of fans rooting for you. A mag like that can't lose.

As for the cover—oh well, maybe some day (sigh).—1501 West Lexington Street, Baltimore 23, Maryland.

You should read Robert A. (!) Heinlein's
BEYOND THIS HORIZON. Fantasy Press,

Reading, Pennsylvania, 1948, \$3.00, since you seemingly refuse to include him in the swordplay boys.

OPERATION F by Captain Kenneth F. Slotter

Dear Editor: A long time and much water since I last managed to push a complimentary letter in your direction but here we are at last. (Note the water referred to above was suitably diluted by whisky, gin, or brandy, according to which bottle was nearest.)

I should double space, shouldn't I? Just to help—and you do deserve it! FANTASTIC STORY QUARTERLY! WONDER STORY ANNUAL! Not to forget the good old faithful TWS/SS twins. Best production in appearance was WSA, trimmed edges no less! The first copy I got I just thought some fan had been thoughtful—but then I got more and more the same. All trimmed!

By the by, many thanks to all USA fans who have taken up the boot-swapping game seriously. To be honest the lot have rallied round so darn well this time that I am getting very busy with sending the return stuff. But I'll get it done in time.

However, to the meat—and by meat I mean that horrible bit of canned beef that came down the mass production line from the pen of one Ray Bradbury. I'll admit that Ray can write. I admire his writing—but please, Mr. Editor, tell him to add a fourth plot to his string. His present three are weak but I don't need to list 'em, do I?

However Ed (Save the World) Hamilton came up with a fine story in THE CITY AT WORLD'S END. If he promised (threatened?) Capt. Futura yarn is as good, I will bow three times to the north, and take back all my hard words about C.F. By the by, I don't seem to have got my hard words on that printad, do I? Pity, Pity, Pity.

Reverting to the slightly older things—I had no complaints about the main portion of TWS June issue. SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND YEARS AWAY was a very nice yarn, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Mr. Jones seems to have mastered the art of plot within plot which makes such excellent science fiction. It also makes equally excellent tales of other kinds, and so I must refute the claim made by some fans that a certain author of sf originated the idea. It goes back way, before then. Just how far back I don't have a clue, but it is probably as old as fiction.

Was also pleased to see Cleve Cartmill in the running with another SPACE SALVAGE story, although this was not the best of the series.

Sorry that no British fan clubs managed to get themselves listed in the July SS. I personally was too darn busy trying to catch up on my personal mail to write anything—and anyway I am not an official representative of any of them at present—but methods that the individuality of the Briton (some folk call it sheer cussedness) has conquered regimentation.

However, it would seem that the boys are co-operating to the extent of arranging a Convention in London, for 1951, at which it is hoped many European fans will attend. Guest of honor is to be no less than L. Sprague de Camp. Let us hope all goes well and that as many USA fans (who can convince their firms they will make good representatives for the Festival of Britain) as possible will attend. It would appear that the Government is arranging the Festival of Britain to coincide with the fan-vention. Or should it be the other way around?

Dame Rumor tells me at long last the Australian boys have a sci-fiction mag down that way, titled THRILLS. Hope it stays, for those folks are even harder pressed for readable material than we Britons.

Also, you will possibly be pleased to note that the fan-financed Nove Publications are bringing out a second program in UK, but we have a long way to go to equal the number of mags in the USA field. However, I do think judging by the limited appeal of certain of them, that you'll find competition pressing for a long time yet.

Reverting to Dame Rumor, she tells me that TWS/SS may go monthly! Any truth is that idea? Dame Rumor is not reliable . . . after all, she is the girl who said a Universal Joint was a place any mug could get in, wasn't she? But that little monthly chime is a real thing. I'd like to believe in, I would. Best of luck, and if possible, make it fortnightly! (No comic strips, tho!)—JGp, R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 23.

Thanks for the nice note but this two-in-one letter business must not become a habit,

Next
Issue

THE CITADEL OF LOST AGES

By LEIGH
BRACKETT

people. Unfortunately we shall not be coming out monthly so Dame Rumor (?) alack speaks falsely. For the rest, thanks for the nice informative chatty missive, Ken—and get us off others in the months to come, please. We like to have you give our U.S. readers word of what is happening in other sections of the fanworld.

BLUE PENCIL YELP

by Vernon L. McCain

Dear Editor: Say Ed, I don't mind your doing a little deletion and censoring on my letters (after all, it IS your magazine). But when you go changing the little nuances of my meaning, I draw the line.

I am referring to the June issue, where you changed my use of the word "[CENSORED]" to "censoring." And I want you to know that the covers on my projected magazine were not going to be daring at all. They were going to be downright "[CENSORED]" which is a completely different thing.

Anyway, I didn't come right out and say your Bersey covers were "[CENSORED]". I just said I'd make them "[CENSORED]". On my magazine. And when I say "[CENSORED]" I mean "[CENSORED]" incidentally, that was the first time I'd ever realized "[CENSORED]" was a "nasty" word. It reminds me of the neat little job of substitution one of the pocket-edition companies did in the version of Dashiell Hammett's "Thin Man."

Getting down to the current issue, I observe that Raymond Z. Gallun has been paying as close attention to Bradbury as the fans here. Only his things distinguish this from a Bradbury story. It is a novella and it has too large a cast of characters to have come from the typewriter of California Ray.

Otherwise it is completely Bradburyish, even to the location. Not that we should complain too much. Gallun did quite a nice job and I suppose Gallun writing Bradbury novels is better than no Bradbury novels at all. But honest Ray (Gallun, that is), you're a pretty good all-arounder.

Being addicted to really good humorous stories, however, award for the best of the month must go to "The Strangest Bedfellows." By the way, who is William Morrison? The name sounds familiar but I don't recall any outstanding stories of the past by him.

Which is all that I find comment-worthy in this issue so I shall stop right here. Aren't you the lucky ones, though?—c/o Western Union, Port Townsend, Washington.

* Vulgar

To the best of our knowledge it was an overeager proofreader rather than ourselves who made the alteration you so object to in the June issue missive. Actually, what odds does it make?

William Morrison has been writing detective and science fiction since well before the war. He even did one of the last Brett Sterling CAPTAIN FUTURE novels—more than one, we believe. Since getting out of service he has concentrated on shorter stuff.

DID ANYBODY MISS ME?

by W. Paul Ganley

Dear Editor: Yes, it's I, I'm back, at last—with leisure to read science-fiction and time to plague editors with over-sized letters—all that's needed is the money to buy all the science-fiction mags that seem to be popping up on the stands these days.

Well, let's get the dirty work over with right away. The stories—it's no use saying they were good because you already know that, although from the letters you receive from fans you might sometimes entertain serious doubts. Enough, however, of whimsy for the moment.

First of all, COFFINS TO MARKS. From your preview of this one in the previous issue I expected something special. In spite of what most fans say ye eddie is a pretty good judge of fantasy, except in my case, where he rejects all my manuscripts (that's not fair, for only one was rejected two

years or so ago and that one so bad that I wouldn't even accept it now for my fanzine, "Fan-Fare").

You already said what I would have said—that COFFINS TO MARKS is what we all have been awaiting from Ray Bradbury, yet which has not been forthcoming. I haven't seen this author much before though I have deduced that he is one of the old guard. He is coming back, no? A lot of the old sci-fi writers seem to be returning to the fold these days.

SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY (a sweet story to read on a Saturday) will have to fall back to second place in this brief (?) discussion of this month's offerings. Until the last few pages it was a good start on, say, a 40,000 word novel—but still it was excellent.

NO HIDING PLACE was good enough to bag third place. I would like this Cartmill fellow except that his style is rather ragged. Maybe it's artificial in this case, since it provides the correct mood for the background of this series. But all the same I dislike it.

The short stories were all about as good as each other, with perhaps THE REVERSED MAN and THE STRANGEST BEDFELLOWS having a slight edge. Even "Wander Oddities" was good this time, with that notation about the human body existing in velveting in velsing in velsing.

Now to the important part of the issue—THE READER SPEAKS. I see I made the grade but I'll wager that if the letter had been by a completely unknown neophyte it would have graced the editorial wastebasket. Well, the reason for the rather unguarded P. S. may be obvious by this time—whether it is or not, its purpose has either been consummated or has failed. The idea was to stir up some interest in ESP or what is commonly referred to as ESP—maybe even a feud

—but who has time for feuds these days?

I guess it Hammett can continue his advertising via TRP. I may as well get in some free publicity too. By this time ye eddie has probably reviewed the first two issues of my magazine, FAN-FARE. I have my doubts as to which portion of the listing they will enhance but that's beside the point.

The point is that "Fan-Fare," starting with this issue, is to be mimeographed, now that I have a machine.

FF, for the edification of those who have not yet fallen prey to my advertising campaigns, is 20 pages long including a cover, contents page & editorial, and letters. Otherwise it consists of fiction (fantasy, sci-fi, and weird) by amateurs, of all lengths up to 10,000 words. Poetry is accepted in small amounts, and articles will be rejected.

Of course one can expect the fiction to be as good as pre fiction—why SHOULD anyone expect the plots to be as good, much less better? Yet that is what ye eddie gives us to believe in THE FRYING PAN! True, all mags are limited by what their authors submit but a few rejections of material merely for bad plotting might have some effect on future submissions.

Take the instance of THE HOUSE OF THE GOD CHULO. Now I don't get SCIENTIFANTASY but that is something I hope to remedy soon. Yet, is it as bad as the editor claims? Certainly it does not equal the oro stuff—it should not because the author is not a pro.

There is no more reason for amateur fiction to be better (in any way) than pro fiction than there is for Class D baseball teams to be better than, let us say, the Boston Red Sox (being partial to same) or then there is for a college football or basketball team to be better than a professional.

People improve in something, whether it be a sport or whether it be plotting and writing—and it is natural for the output of a pro author to be far superior to the crud he hacked out ten years previously. Likewise the material amateur authors are writing in the present day will be far inferior to what these authors will be doing a decade or two from now. Practice makes perfect and the pros have had more practice than the amateur writers. Accordingly their plots should be better, their treatment should be more mature.

In other words the amateur writers of today are doing far better than could be expected of them. Once in a while they fall. The same can be said of the professionals.

Besides, a lot of fanzines aren't too particular about the stuff they publish. Many amateurs haven't an editor to reject their stuff when it's unworthy as the pros do.

There are exceptions to all of this. A lot of fanzine editors do reject manuscripts. The trouble is all of them do not, and among those that do the standard of value is less defined than among the professional editors.

Therefore, instead of condemning (or satirizing) a bad amateur story (which, after all, is only to be expected from all these conditions), why not more ignore it and spend your time praising the outstanding ones.

Am I wrong? Maybe—but I don't think so. I await your answer with anticipation.

Anyhow, keep the FRYING PAN. I'm not in taver (as you may have guessed from the above) of condemning every average fan story but some of the worse efforts SHOULD be pointed out as such and ye eddie has a propensity for doing such. If that weren't done zines and stories might tend to decline slightly. And, as you pointed out, THE FRYING PAN is not always critical.

On the other hand, why not expand the FRYING PAN to include a listing similar to the one in SS? It would, as someone mentioned, definitely cut down the time lag. FAN-

FARE is going to have a supernal Anniversary Issue for January, 1951, and in order to have it reviewed at that time I'm already making plans to have it done by October or sooner, so as to send you a pre-pub copy.

Enough of this—back to TRS for a few left words. Mr. Bradley would seem to have his hands full—let's hope he prefers swords too. Anyway la Zimmer-Bredley has the wrong idea about one thing—I know what she means by the strange nostalgia for an alien world and I think she is wrong about women being most sensitive to the feeling than men. The man just don't tell about it so much, that's all.—119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York.

Skipping your various other beeves and queries, W. Paul, let's concentrate on this FRYING PAN panning. We believe the title tells the purpose.

Actually, when we decided that TWS needed a department devoted to fanzines to mate up with SS, we had just finished a review column and were somewhat a-wearied of some of the fan freneticisms, feuds, follies and so on which had so recently been steam-rollering over us.

We decided in a good humored way to poke a bit of fun at them, even to point out an occasional lapse of taste or grammar. Sometimes even to hand out a bit of crisp bacon by way of praise. We had and have no intention of running two fanzine reviews—have mercy, fellows, on ye generale reader!

And don't take TFP too much to heart when it barks at your effort. It has no more real bite than a two-day-old puppy—though it may be that it is capable of creating as many messes—fanwise, that is. We certainly hope so.

VAGUE. SHIVERS

by Roy Tackett

Dear Editor: Your editorial in the June TWS was, as usual, thought provoking. I like these editorials of yours even if I violently disagree with them sometimes. Personally I do not fear the H-bomb because it is something new and unknown. I fear it because I have a vague idea of its potentialities. However, if we can conquer our fear of our fellow men we will have nothing to fear from the bomb. And if we don't about unmyriad millions of us will never know the difference anyway.

You say that we are living in an era of snowballing scientific expansion. Uh-huh. How long will it be before the snowball starts rolling though? In this age, where the illusion of security is missing, contact between the scientists of various nations is out of the question. Somebody might let slip a military secret, you know. Without the free passage of ideas between scientists there is a possibility of this snowball slowing down and eventually stopping completely.

Congratulations on getting Orban on your roster of artists. Why not let him do a cover?

The June issue of TWS was very good. I especially liked "Sunday is 3000 Years Away." The rest were good with the possible exception of "Coffins to Mars." I didn't finish it. Discovering that the principal character is named "Rube" automatically set me against it. However, I'll have another go at reading it in a couple days.

Most noticeable thing about this issue is the absence of Finlay. Not entirely regrettable either. I admire his work but he slips badly when he turns from the so-called pure fantasy to science-fiction. Who did the illus for "The Strangest Bedfellows"?

Tch, you are getting ahead of yourself again, la TRS you say that the Space Salvage series wound up "in our last issue." Uh-huh.

For some reason I liked Fred Remus's poem and your acedendum thereto. Mayhap something will be done about getting space flight really started before too long. The popularity of science fiction is rocketing skyward and there is a remote possibility that in years to come a great many

people will begin to be curious about our planetary neighbors and the pressure of that vague something called public opinion will force interplanetary exploration. I said it was a remote possibility, didn't I?

The rising popularity of science-fiction scares me though. It may be that the prediction of Brother Jakes will be borne out. I can see it now. "Passion on Pluto. A thrilling story of love at the outermost edge of the solar system." "Sam Shovel and the Martian Sandhog Caper." Ugh! Fans will discover a way to get off the earth just to escape something like that. The thought chills me.

With the exception of a couple of stinkers ("The Lady Is A Witch" for instance) you've done a good job with TWS and SS. If you ever print "Passion on Pluto" I'll see to it that you have to read the thing a thousand times. See you next month in STARTLING.—191 21st Avenue, San Francisco 16, California.

Don't worry too much about the expansion of stf. Contrary to the beliefs of some readers it is not nearly the mystic chapter of whatchamacallit that some of you seem to think it. A good many hundreds of thousands seem to understand it and on the whole like it as it is.

So "Sam Shovel" and "The Pasha of Pluto" are no more likely to turn up in the near future than they have been in the past. And, Roy, thanks for a pleasant epistle.

PRETTY GOOD

by James Lewis

Dear Ed: Except for that monstrosity on the front the June issue was pretty good (for a change). I enjoyed the Jones novel very much though I was three pages ahead of the rest though the whole story. No Hiding Place was the only Cartmill story I ever liked.

It was just lucky for Jaska though that those big hairy black things (editors, mayhap???) were well versed in tele-report. Well, huzz for Ray Gallun for accurately describing Mers for once. The next best stories were, respectively, "The Pilgrims," "Recognition," "The Reversed Men" and "The Strangest Bedfellows."

For someone who states that only intelligent letters will be printed your letter column seems to print a lot of rather—er—silly letters. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy them immensely. It just seemed strange, thus all.—29-10 Butler St., E. Elmhurst, N. Y.

P.S. In what ish of SS did N. Daniels' "Speak of the Devil" appear?

Norm Daniels' SPEAK OF THE DEVIL appeared in the March, 1943, issue of STARTLING STORIES. His other SS novel (with the exception of THE LADY IS A WITCH) appeared earlier under the title of THE GREAT EGO. He has given most of his career to detective mystery and air-war work.

UP FOR REPRINT?

by Charles Irons

Dear Editor: Congratulations on another excellent issue. I don't like to comment on the stories as it is all a matter of opinion but I would like to say they were all excellent. One thing I would like to mention is that I certainly enjoyed Cleve Cartmill's Space Salvage series. It is one of the best you have had in the past two or three years.

I have been reading your magazines for the past year and a half. In that time I have read some very enjoyable stories. In my opinion the following stories should be put up for reprint a few years from now:

AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT, SS.
THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, SS.
THE BLACK GALAXY, SS.
FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY, SS.
SEA KINGS OF MARS, TWS.

FURY FROM LILLIPUT, TWS.
LION OF COMARRE, TWS.
THE LONELY PLANET, TWS.
THE SHADOW MEN, SS.
THE RETURN OF CAPTAIN FUTURE, SS.
PLANET OF THE SMALL MEN, TWS.
THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS, TWS.
WINE OF THE DREAMERS, SS.
CHILDREN OF THE SUN, SS.
COFFINS TO MARS, TWS.

One story I enjoyed that appeared before I started reading science fiction was THE IRRITATED PEOPLE by Ray Bradbury. The humorous type of story does not appear too often. I wish Mr. Bradbury would write more. I am glad to see your two reprint magazines. I enjoyed the stories in them immensely.—New Egypt, New Jersey.

Let's see—your list of authors include in the order given—Arthur C. Clarke, A. E. van Vogt, Murray Leinster, Charles L. Harness, Leigh Brackett, Leinster, Clarke, Leinster, van Vogt, Edmond Hamilton, Leinster, James Blish, John D. MacDonald, Hamilton and Raymond Z. Gallun.

And what about Kuttner? Especially his Highbens if you like stf humor? We agree about Bradbury's TIP. Whenever we hear Dinah Shore or some other canary warble, "I've got those mad about him, sad about him, etc., blues" we see that one all over again.

TRAVEL WITH BURROUGHS by Vernell Coriell

Dear Sir: Regarding your comments about the Burroughs Bulletin in the April issue of your magazine. In all fairness I would like for it to be brought to the attention of the readers of TWS that to date ten issues of the Bulletin have been published and only three of these have reviewed motion pictures. Two of the reviews were of TARZAN films and the third was of a rather antique production entitled THE LION MAN, which starred Charles Louchneur and was based on ERB's novel THE LAD AND THE LION.

I admit that BB#2 deals a good deal with the new Tarzan, Lex Barker, but it was my opinion that the many followers of the Burroughs stories, both book and film versions, would be interested in an article about the tenth actor to portray the ape-man on the screen. Perhaps I was wrong—but I want to make it clear that the BB is not a movie fanzine and it positively is not tainted with commercialism!

The Bulletin is published and paid for by myself and except for a very few donations by interested fans I have received no payment for the BB from any source—including Mr. Lesser's studio! The BB is still distributed to Burroughs fans free of charge and if something that is GIVEN away with nothing but good will expected in return, is commercialism then someone had better re-write Mr. Webster's dictionary.

I agree with you that Stefan publishing should be a task of devotion to stf and fantasy. Well, the BB is a task of devotion to Mr. Burroughs' work and certainly a great many of ERB's works are stf—THE MOON MAID, LAND THAT TIME FORGOT, THE MONSTER MEN, SYNTHETIC MEN OF MARS and others. Stf appears quite frequently in the Tarzan books too—Tarzan's reduction in size by THE ANT MEN, cell-transplantation in THE LION MAN and TARZAN AT THE EARTH'S CORE to name a few.

Since the publication of BB #29 I have personally met Mr. Burroughs and eight of the ten screen Tarzans, whom I interviewed (including Lex Barker, who asked me to correct the statement about him having attended Princeton) and I intended to publish these interviews in future issues of the BB along with rare photos of the early Tarzans.

I think the ERB fans are interested in the long line of actors who have portrayed Tarzan—and there is certainly nothing commercial at this late date, in the films of Elmo Lincoln, Frank Merrill, etc. But if I'm wrong I'd like the fans to let me know. However, when other fanzines start reviewing DESTINATION MOON and other forthcoming Stf films, will they too be accused of having the "faint of commercialism" in their veins?

The BB is now distributed to over 500 people, from the 12 year old fan to the mature and intelligent fan who finds ERB's works "good reading." Also a number of famous stf and fantasy authors are or have been Burroughs fans—Nelson Bond, Ray Bradbury, HPL to name a few.

Anyway I have been sending you the BB for reviews so I could absorb your critical remarks and perhaps improve on future issues of the BB (isn't that the idea of THE FRYING PAN in the first place?). Well, thank you for your comments and under separate cover I am sending you a copy of BB #10.

Oh yes, if you do not know who Professor Arthur Maxon of Cornell University is, just ask your large son (aged 14) I'm sure he can enlighten you.

Frankly, I think that under the circumstances your "punches" are a bit lower than the BB's type of exploitation. And in defense of myself and the BB I'd like to quote from the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

I have served my simple plan,
If I bring one hour of joy,
To the boy who is half a man,
And the man who is half a boy.

That is all I intend doing with the BB, to pass on the enjoyment I get out of it.—1314 Janssen St., Pekin, Illinois.
P.S. The BB will continue being sent to you and one of these days it will make the "A" listing.

Well, we apologize, Mr. Coriell. Somehow we seem to have added things up wrongly where your Bulletin is concerned. And incidentally, since Mr. Burroughs' death apparently occurred between your writing of this letter and our getting it into print, we should like to take time out right now to say that we regret his demise greatly—both as an stf editor and a one-time Tarzan reader and fan.

Thanks for explaining things more fully and for continuing to send the BB.

VANISHED HIGH by Tom Covington

Dear Editor: Guess what. For once I'm not going to gripe about your cover policy. You know how I feel about it and why I feel that way, so that's that.

The lead-story high that you hit with "Wine of the Dreamers" in SS seems to have vanished. "Sunday is Three Thousand Miles Away" is above average though. In fact it's almost good.

Yippee! At last the Space Salvage series is ended (I hope) and what an ending. "No Hiding Place" ties with two other stories for best in this issue. The black and hairy are swell. I'd like to have one of them for a pet. They're one of the things that made Cernill's story good.

Now that the Space Salvage series is over, I'm looking forward to some swell humorous shots by Cernill.

The other novel, "Coffins to Mars" was good too. Gallun writes in a smooth, almost beautiful style.

I apologize for all the nasty things I've said about St. Clair. "The Pillows" completely remodeled my opinion of her stories. I only hope that she can maintain the pace.

Well, "No Hiding Place," "Coffins to Mars" and "The Pillows" were the three best stories in this issue. In fact, the three best stories in an exceptionally good issue. But, as you said in "The Frying Pan," a true (ahem) fan can always find something to criticize. My uncomplimentary criticism for this issue goes to Clarke's (he's one of my favorite authors too) "The Reversed Man." Consider it criticized.

Also Reynolds' "Precognition."

You gave the 1. S. F. C. C. organ, THE EXPLORER a "B" rating in your January column in SS. Just wait till you get the third issue, bub. It's greatly improved.—315 Dawson Street, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Very well, with folded hands, etc., we shall wait for your so-and-so old third issue. If it's as entertaining as the "man" of the same numeral you'll really have something, Tom.

TRADITIONAL by Fred Stuckey

Dear Sir: It seems to be some sort of tradition to begin this kind of letter with "this is the first time I have ever written to your magill, etc." Consider it said. When you get right down to it it's true.

The main reason I am writing this is the letter by John

W. Jakes in the June, 1950 issue of good ole TWS and your remarks thereof.

Mr. Jakes divides "our particular field of attention" into two types, Science Fiction and Future Fiction. One fiction about science and the other fiction about the future. It seems to me that there should be a third type in there somewhere, Fiction about science AND the future.

This gives those that like pure science-fiction their meat, those that like future fiction theirs and those that like a little bit of both theirs. I prefer the latter two myself. Authors are getting so much science in their stories nowadays the ordinary reader hardly knows which is what.

I also agree with his last seven paragraphs most emphatically. His comments on war, history, heroes, dictators and mad scientists go right to the crux of the situation. This letter, Jakes, should have been set up in large type in your editorial page.

As to your comments on Paul Revere and Billy the Kid, so what? Maybe they weren't everything history tries to make them out but they were a part of that history just as heroes and villains and dictators and even scientists, mad or otherwise, will be a part of the history of the future. Fast seem to ignore the fact that five hundred years from now people will be just as human as they are today. Authors do the same.

There will probably be Hitlers and Colin Kelleys and Douglas MacArthur's and Winston Churchills and Danbarks and Wake Reads just as there were during the Second World War. There will probably be futuristic Paul Reveres and Billy the Kids, too.

The trouble with fans is that they're in a rut. They read a story along these lines and immediately start shouting hack. A few might grudgingly admit that the plot was pretty good and the writing okay but, they add, this idea is so old it's putrid, or words to that effect. Maybe it is but the whole business has been going on from the beginning of time and will probably keep on going on to the end of it.

Well, I'd better stop commenting on someone else's letter and stick in a few of my own, enant the June ish. Believe it or not I kinda like Bergay. His cover for this ish and the last one were pretty good.

Why not a few of those future fiction stories once in a while? Stories about Star travel and adventure or even inter-planetary stories would be a welcome change from all these time travel stories and such we've been getting lately.

Why not have more stories like Leinster's Kim Randall trilogy, his Black Galaxy and, last issue, his Planet of Small Moa. How about more stories like Ed Hamilton's Star of Life in SS and Leigh Brackett's Most stories about those cities, Veliks and Barroshesh and the others.

Now for comments on the stories in this issue.

NO HIDING PLACE by Carmill was the best in the series and best in the issue.

COFFINS TO MARS by Gellan was second. Had good characterization and the emotional description was excellent.

SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY by Jones comes in a beleated third. This was written pretty well but I just couldn't get interested. This is the type of story that has been used too much in your mag lately.

Why not get Jones to do some novels or novelets like the SEVEN JEWELS OF CHAMAR he did for a competitor which specializes in adventure STF a few years ago.

I won't comment on the short stories. To me they were no better and no worse than your usual run of short stories.

Orben was okay but he can't take the place of Lawrence. The rest I won't even mention. Let's have Lawrence back next issue, huh?

These comments on the June issue of TWS are strictly my own and any relation to anyone else's is purely coincidental.—(18 North Richard Street, Bedford, Pennsylvania.

For your (utterly) confidential information it so happens that we have some yarns of the type you yearn for coming up. In December we shall feature THE CITADEL OF LOST AGES by la Brackett as already promised and, in March, OVERLORDS OF MAXUS by Jack Vance and I, THE UNMORTAL by Emmett McDowell—all of which are strong on the adventure side.

And in the November STARTLING the novel will be THE FIVE GOLD BANDS, a galactic hammer by Jack Vance, to be followed in March, 1951, by Leigh Brackett's grand novel THE STARMEN OF ELYRDIS. Which should keep things under control your way for the nonce. Okay?

SEVENTEEN

by Robert L. Moag, Jr.

Dear Sir: In my seventeen (17) years of reading STF (capitalized deliberately) this is the first letter I have ever written to a readers' department but your June issue contained a missive which I felt must not go unanswered.

I refer, of course, to that peaned by Clifford Dye in which he says everyone writing now seems to be sort of new to STF. It's true! All the old times have been struck dumb (who ever said they were smart?). I guess they are all publishing fanmags or something. So I guess you and I will have to pick up the torch for our generation, Cliff.

Now about Wallace West's story, LURE OF POLARIS—if you will turn with me to the file of back issues of a certain mag whose editor had the pos name of Don Stuart not too long ago, in the year 1936 you find a short story called EN ROUTE TO PLUTO by Wallace West, which contains the same characters in a somewhat different setting, O.K. Cliff?

Now let's talk about your mag. It's improving. As I gaze over my back numbers, I find that it is at least 90% better than in 1939-40-41 (I forgot to put "now" in there, see to it, will ye?). I won't comment on the stories in the June ish of TWS, except to say that they were up to par. Best story you or your companion mag SS have published to date is AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT by Arthur C. Clarke in the Nov., '48, ish of SS. More, please!

I notice in the Jano, '50, TWS that a letter by J. W. Jakes names names, both of another Ed and another mag, a dem-petitor. Can it be that at last the insurmountable barrier is down? Most of us (fans) read all the mags published and moon because they are so few, so I can't see where using the names of other mags and/or editors hits the side of any one mag. How can it, has the millennium arrived at last?—R.O. No. 1, Zellenople, Pa.

No—no millennium, Robert, wethinks (usthinks? NO!). It just happened we thought Brother Jakes' letter was strengthened by the inclusion of those unnameable things you mention above. By the way, bub, now that you've broken the proverbial crystal surface, how about continuing with further epistles?

It's a curious thing about so-called "regular" competitors to this column. They do have a turnover, averaging about two years of contributions apiece. But there are always eager neophytes waiting in line to crash the sacred (?) precincts. There's about as much fun in watching the new develop as there is sadness in seeing tried and/or true drift away.

WEIRD MALE

by Dave Hammond

Dear Editor: Was I surprised I picked up the latest issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories and, being first a few, searched through the letter section searching for the letter of a certain Paul Gauley, who, as I learned in another magazine, was going to say something about me. I repeat—was I surprised!

Why? There was a letter by me in the aforementioned! I got nearly as much kick out of seeing that as I did in seeing my first letter (SS January, 1950) printed!

I fear next month—Volume 1, Number 1 of INCUBUS will probably be reviewed in SS!

Golly gee whizz! (To be absolutely trivial) On I get the weird mail! I do not mean, of course, my friends but some of the other staff! All sorts of others—that's it—everybody wants to tell you something.

Authors I'd like to see more of in SS & TWS: Edmond Hamilton and/or his wife, Leigh Brackett, Joe Gibson, John MacDoneld, Raymond F. Jones, Arthur C. Clarke and a few others.

Another thing—I wish you would use new authors whenever they write stories that are good enough.

"The Reversed Man" was certainly not original. Only Clarke's writing made reading it worth the effort.

Right now, it hasn't happened yet but I expect that soon I'll be seeing fan letters published and editors writing editorials about Edgar Rice Burroughs. Some fans, notably John Gilton of Minneapolis, have got the idea that I believe every book ERB ever wrote is classic. This is wrong—Burroughs has written lousy books—and he has written MAGNIFICENT books.

I suspect that a percentage of the Burroughs haters (there

are some, you know—wizards like Janette and Gilson) detest Burroughs, because they first read his poorest novels. It is my opinion that if a person new to Burroughs first read such classics as "The Land that Time Forgot," "The Wer Chief," "At the Earth's Core," "A Princess of Mars," "The Chessman of Mars," "The Eternal Lover," "Tarzan the Terrible," "Tarzan at the Earth's Core" and others he would be as loyal a Burroughs fan as I am.

Of course, if your first experiences with Burroughs are through the movies or comics (neither of which Burroughs wrote incidentally) I can sympathize with you. Also books such as "Swords of Mars," "Tarzan and the Forbidden City," "Tarzan and the Leopard Men," "Synthetic Men of Mars," "John Carter and the Giant of Mars" (a Mars story that has never appeared in book form), "Escape on Venus," "Pellucidar" and "Lana of Gathol" (Book One of the latter it, however VERY good) were not among the best of ERB's works.

THUS—I am a Burroughs fan because of those classics that he did write—not for every one he wrote about anything.

Does anybody understand my point of view?—806 Oak Street, Rumson, New Jersey.

Somehow we don't see much to comment on in the above. In fact this Hammond is a pretty amiable character, n'est-ce pas?

IRREVOCABLY

by Morton D. Paley

Dear Editor: Ghu's shmoos, I'm back again! Yessir, Doubtlessly and irrevocably I have once more invaded the sacred confines of TWS with a monstrous misivel The June issue of TWS is undoubtedly above average. Here's how I rate the stories:

1—SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND YEARS (MILES) AWAY
The printer seems to have been somewhat in doubt as to the title of this one. Miles or years, tho, it was good. Raymond Jones has greatly improved as a writer.

2—THE REVERSED MAN
This is the kind of a story that I'd classify as definitely "anthologizable." It's have more by Clark!

3—NO HIDING PLACE
4—COFFINS TO MARS

Both good novelets. Raymond Z. Gellum is one of the few old-time writers who have kept up with passing years. Cartmill's yarn was well-written, but somewhat corny.

5—THE PILLOWS
Margaret St. Clair's weird s-f is tops. While not up to the GARDENER, THE PILLOWS was definitely suspenseful and intriguing.

6—THE STRANGEST BEDFELLOWS
I still refuse to believe that Morrison is Morrison. Maybe he's Cartmill or perhaps Merwin or Sprogue.

7—RECOGNITION
Keep the short-stories coming! While they can't rank with the longer stories they definitely are interesting. Reynolds promises to blossom into a Bradbury of tomorrow.
Your editorial on the H-bomb was very thought-provoking. I am afraid that Men's science is maturing far faster than Men himself and, like Frankenstein or Rossum's robots, will destroy its creator. Now that the balance between "bullets and error" (see Verne's TRIP TO THE MOON) has been totally destroyed it seems that homo sapiens will fall victim to his own intellect.

The current crop of letters isn't very controversial. It seems to me that every time we hit a hot two-sided situation you steer us away from it. I don't understand this.

Book reviews are good—the FRYING PAN always laugh-provoking. By the way, you'll find my own little piece of trash in this envelope, for frying in TFP. BEELZEBUB ratings is now a one-sheeter and free but I hope to ped it into a mid-size-sized kind of teen obnoxiousity (there is such a word?).—1455 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York.

It's obnoxiousness, Morton—and while William Morrison's actual name is Joseph Samachson he has not, as far as we know, written under any but his WM nom de plume.

ONE ISSUE OLD—BUT GOOD

by B. Lauritz Hanson

Skeldic Oretorio of a Scandinavian Hohhot (From Duluth) on reading the April TWS

Dear Ed, as you can plainly see,
A poet of a high degree
Has written lines, to bring you fame,
And save Space Opera from shame.
Ye poet sharpeneth his pen, likewise his trusty broad-knife.

The psychos of psychology
And every phony ology,
Have robbed us now of fair space's gleam
And substituted nut house dreams.

Chorus: Slightly off-stage burning you Yogi in oil.

From Booby Hatch
Comes many a batch
Of stiffs who hate science.

CARNIVAL OF MADNESS

Ray Bradbury has said his bit
From me he gets no thanks for it.
In fact, the pestilentious hound
Should be laid six feet under ground.
Two small boys with pea-shooters catch Bradbury in the act of reaching for a cigarette butt.

PLANET OF SMALL MEN

But Murray Leinster, Ulsterman,
Has rescued us from Orson's ban.
No reruns of human guilt,
He fuses Alien to the bit.
This is true stff—take it from me—
I've read the stuff since thirty-three.
Leinster, crowned with roman leaves, is escorted in by thirty Vikings and congratulated by the residents of Iceland.

THE TIME CAVE
Friend Sheldon? he's no friend of mine.
In fact, he don't deserve a line.
Sheldon is ignominiously yanked off stage by the hook.

JOURNEY FOR SEVEN
Now good MacDonald, honest Scot,
Deserves my praises, hero's a lot.
Of seven, he picked three bad eggs.
Ne'theless we'll forgive the yeggs,
And concentrate upon the story
Which should him elevate to glory.
And also checks, multiferous
If not, give us a hearty cress.

Rattle of drums, Triumphant procession of MacDonald borne on the shoulders of twenty fens who remember when stf was stf. Gets handshakes from King of Sweden.

THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS

And ignorance is Blish, I fear.
Let's have no more wolfbans this year.
Eris Blish chased by a runt Chikwahua.

NOCTURNE
To Wallace West, a rose I fling.
The man who made the flowers to sing.
Space opera of its very best.
His yarn will pass in any test.
Twenty-one gun salute as West is driven in coach and four by all stf editors to be decorated by King of Norway.

THE BORGHESI TRANSPARENCY

Of Carter Sprague I say no more
Then, "Show the culprit to the door!"
Three Mazas sweeping over twisted talent.

LITTLE JOE

Now Cartmill, there's the man for me.
A ganyouine space opera
In all its ancient pristine glory.
Can any write a better story?
I doubt it, and to prove my point
I'll toss covillar from the joint!
Brynhild gives Cartmill a kizz.

L'ENVOI
Dear Ed, I've dealt thus generously.
Can you be cruel, do less for me?
Then print this sheet of Skeldic glory
I ask no pay. That's all, begorree.
Poet taking careful aim with his trusty six gun in case the Envoi is not granted.

Seriously, the only story I didn't like was "The Time Cave," but I am getting tired of all these sneers about "Space Opera." It is still the best in Science Fiction.—Laverna, North Dakota.

We're getting tired and so are you
Let's call this off and say, "We're through!"
But if your TWS you've pondered
Then write us at Suite 1400,
10 East 40th, New York 16
And get the bile from out your spleen.
You'll surely find it tres small loss
With which we'll now say, "Adios."

—THE EDITOR



SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW



THE INCOMPLETE ENCHANTER by Fletcher Pratt & L. Sprague de Camp, The Prime Press, Philadelphia (\$2.50).

This is a fine example of the type of rollicking time-travel tale into legend and past fantasia in which these two authors used to specialize so happily. It revolves about one Harold Shea, an institutional psychologist who gets vicarious thrills out of dressing up heroically in his spare time—but whose life has been heretofore confined to prosaic academic pursuits.

Disliking acutely a less introverted colleague, to say nothing of the somewhat overpowering attentions of the buxom Gertrude, a laboratory assistant who has sublimated her maternal instincts where Harold is concerned into something very different, our hero takes flight via an unfinished experiment of Dr. Chalmers, his boss, into the land of the Norse gods.

Although he has the foresight to provide himself with enough equipment for a scout-master, Harold soon finds that in this strange world his weapons are utterly useless and, facing the deadline of the Twilight of the Gods, he is forced to develop some hitherto only dreamed-of resources in himself.

He manages—in hairbreadth and hilarious fashion, ultimately emerging smack into the arms of Gertrude. In his second flight he takes his boss with him to the land of Spencerian magic, where they both get involved in a zany web of runic intrigue, ultimately being inducted into a wizard's guild.

On this occasion Harold works out a far more satisfactory solution before returning to his home age and Earth. All in all we enjoyed **THE INCOMPLETE ENCHANTER** about as much as any fantasy of its genre. It's darn good fun all the way—and almost impossible to lay down once begun.

FLIGHT INTO SPACE, an anthology of space travel compiled by Donald A. Wollheim, Frederick Fell, New York (\$2.75).

Editor Wollheim has come up with a

neat device in this compilation, opening with a tale of Sol (**SUNWARD** by Stanton A. Coblentz) and continuing with a story of each of the planets (including Earth) and the Asteroids (**AJAX OF AJAX** by Martin Pearson), all the way out to Pluto (**THE RAPE OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM** by Leslie F. Stone).

All in all he has turned the trick neatly enough, with **PARASITE PLANET** by the late Stanley G. Weinbaum, **THE SEEKERS** by Robert Moore Williams and **RED STORM ON JUPITER** by Frank Belknap



Long heading the parade in our more or less humble opinion.

If you are a collector of sf anthologies, this one certainly belongs on your ever-expanding bookshelf.

THREE HUNDRED YEARS HENCE by Mary Griffith, The Prime Press, Philadelphia (no price listed).

A limited edition of one of the earlier Utopia stories (first published in Philadelphia, 1836), which is more of a curiosity than an accurate prophecy. The author's preoccupation with rights for women and her utter inability to foresee the immediate results of the industrial age upon which her world had already embarked make more for quaintness than reader amazement.

However, the volume is interesting as an expression of the dreams of its period and the introduction, by Nelson F. Adkins, is a first-class little essay in its own right. Thoughtful, and written with a deadly seriousness which provides its own share of chuckles.

—THE EDITOR

STF MOVIE REVIEW

DESTINATION MOON, George Pal Productions, Inc. Screenplay by Rip Van Ronkel, Robert A. Heinlein and James O'Hanlon. From a novel by Mr. Heinlein. Photographed in Technicolor by Lionel Lindes, ASC. Cartoon sequence, Walter Lantz. Technical advisor, Chesley Bonestell. Music by Leith Stevens. An Eagle Lion Films release. Directed by Irving Pichel.

Cast

Barnes John Archer
Cargraves Warner Anderson
General Thayer Tom Powers
Sweeney Dick Wesson
Mrs. Cargraves Erin O'Brien Moore

IN *Destination Moon*, Messers Pal, Pichel and Linden, abetted by those two science fiction stalwarts, Robert A. Heinlein and Chesley Bonestell, and a cast of fine if non-stellar players, have made what is unquestionably the finest venture into stf the talking screen has yet achieved.

The scenes in Tycho's crater on the Moon are probably the high point of the production from a pure fan point of view—but this is a lot more than a mere masterpiece of trick photography. In fact the photography and sets are so good they register as reality rather than tricks and are accepted by the audience as incredible and utterly gripping reality.

The story is simple and its simplicity is its chief virtue. It is the tale of a small group of determined Americans to get to the Moon before anyone else, despite prejudiced and ignorant opposition at home and the skilled sabotage and propaganda of alien nations.

Ultimately the prime movers in the plan, hard-bitten General Thayer, dynamic but human industrialist Jim Barnes, brilliant scientist Dr. Cargraves, along with last-minute-substitute radioman Sweeney, take off in place of a crew that lacks training and undertake the expedition themselves.

They meet with near disaster on the way out, all but crash when they land in Tycho and come close to being stuck on the Moon through an over-use of fuel—which makes the return trip a touch-and-go business.

But they manage—and more important they manage like real people faced with real problems. This, coupled with the reality of the settings and dialogue, gives the picture all the impact of a documentary film.

Destination Moon is one film that doesn't need stars. The story, the settings, the actors are its solid core—and the stars are in the heavens instead of in the space suits. All in all it is a tremendous milestone in bringing real science fiction to the screen. This is one you can't afford to miss!

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The FRYING PAN



A Fanzine Commentary

LUCKY is the fanzine which gets pro-
author Robert Bloch to contribute
a few words. For Mr. Bloch seems not
only to have a very sound all-around
idea of just what stf is all about—but
to have a hilariously dry and succinct
way of expressing his views.

In the second anniversary issue of
Peon, published by Charles Lee Riddle,
PN1, USN, Fleet All Weather Training
Unit, Pac., c/o Fleet Post Office, San
Francisco, California—one of the better
fanzines as a rule—Mr. Bloch has come
up with a **CREDO FOR FANTASY
WRITERS**, which in our opinion rates
republishing in its entirety, to wit and
as follows—

CREDO FOR FANTASY WRITERS

by Robert Bloch

(The following oath is recommended to be ad-
ministered to all professional writers of weird
or science fiction by the editor who purchases
their first story. It is suggested that the writer
be forced to place his left hand upon a copy
of the **NECRONOMICON** and raise his right
hand in the general direction of the editor's
check book, while repeating the following
pledge.)

I, John Doe, being of unsound mind and body
and otherwise qualified as a potential writer of
fantastic fiction, do hereby resolve to adhere
to the following restrictions in the practice of
my profession, viz, namely and also to wit—

1. Never to write a story about a mad doctor,
a mad scientist or a mad professor.
2. Or even a sane one if that can be avoided.
3. Or, if it can't, never to give one of the above
characters a beautiful daughter.

1. Never to write a story about a so-called "giant brain."
2. At least, no more than 6 feet in diameter.
3. Never to write a story about a comical leprechaun.
4. Or a serious leprechaun.
5. Or any lousy leprechaun.
6. Never to write a story about a beautiful native girl named Moola, who turns into a leopard, a black panther, a cobra, a tigress, a vampire bat, a cat or an aardvark.
7. Never to write a story about a timid, weak, poor little clerk who is suddenly gifted with supernatural powers and gets mixed up with a "hardboiled city editor" when he tries to convince him that he can foretell the winner of the Kentucky Derby or the Girls' Intercity Basketball Tournament.
8. I further resolve not to write stories about dinosaur eggs that hatch.
9. Or brontosaurus, pterodactyl, allosaurus, diplocoodus, triceratops, stegathorus or tyrannosaurus eggs that hatch.
10. Or that don't hatch, for that matter.
11. I will not write stories about gallant wipers, oilmen, engineers, pilots, navigators, astrologers or just plain stowaways on space-ships who manage to improvise some last-minute solution to keep the space-ship from

[Turn page]

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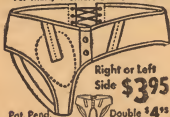
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crashing and then pay for their gallantly heroic effort with their lives as a result of being exposed, during this ordeal, to the deadly fumes or rays of the Sterno which propels the vessel around.

15. I will also try to avoid writing sentences like the above, particularly in the front parts of stories.
16. I will not write stories about Martians who come to Earth and cannot get anyone to believe they are from Mars.
17. I will not write stories about Earthmen who go to Mars and cannot get anyone to believe they are from Earth.
18. I will not write stories about automobiles, airplanes, tractors or automatic-milking-machines that come to life.
19. I shall try to avoid tales wherein people are drawn into or out of mirrors, oil paintings, photographs or drawings on privy walls.
20. I will do my best not to write about kingdoms under the sea or kingdoms inside volcanoes or kingdoms inside clouds or kingdoms on the dark side of the Moon, etc. And if I must use such themes I will try to change the kingdoms into republics, democracies or Consumer Co-operatives just in the interest of variety.
21. I shall endeavor to avoid High Priests whenever possible—including the ecclesiastical dignitaries of Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria and all points west. Ditto for priestesses.
22. I leave the problem of "uranium piles" to my physician.
23. I will not write stories about mankind's struggle to rebuild civilization after the destruction of total atomic warfare, nor about mankind's struggle to oust alien conquerors after interplanetary warfare, nor about mankind's struggle to repel giant insects, giant reptiles, giant plants, giant robots or giant midgets.
24. While I'm at it I'll avoid all insect, reptile, plant and robot menaces, including the inverted device of making one of the insects, reptiles, plants or robots a friendly character. Anybody who wants to make friends with a giant reptile has my permission to do so—but not for me, thanks—at least not while sober.
25. I shall avoid heroes who will do anything on any planet to anybody for any length of time in order to get enough money to buy drinks.
26. I will not write stories about young men who fall in love with vampires and drive stakes through their hearts to give them "peace."
27. Or about young men who fall in love with ghosts and then commit suicide in order to "join them forever."

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28. Or about small boys who can see spirits, werewolves, Elementals, fairies or Martians while their parents scoff.
29. I will eschew the tale of the two lovers who are reincarnated throughout history and get together somehow during World War II in order to die heroically and "be together now until the end of time."
30. I refuse to write the story about the transplanted brains, hands, eyes or small intestines.
31. Or large intestines.
32. I will not write the story about the civilization where everybody thinks on at least three levels and insists on talking about it.
33. Or not talking about it.
34. It is understood, however, that I will be allowed to disregard any or all of the above restrictions if I get a chance to write one of the above stories for money. After all, a fantasy-writer has to eat. Although in view of the above plots one sometimes wonders, . . .

Our sole editorial addendum to the above credo is a sub rosa suggestion that all of these restrictions be applied to fantasy or sf writers for fan magazines—and since the editors of fan magazines cannot pay for submitted material as a rule, there is no earthly or unearthly reason for disregarding them ever.

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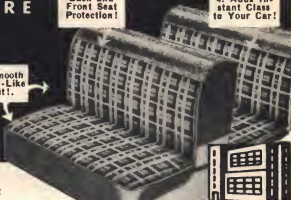
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